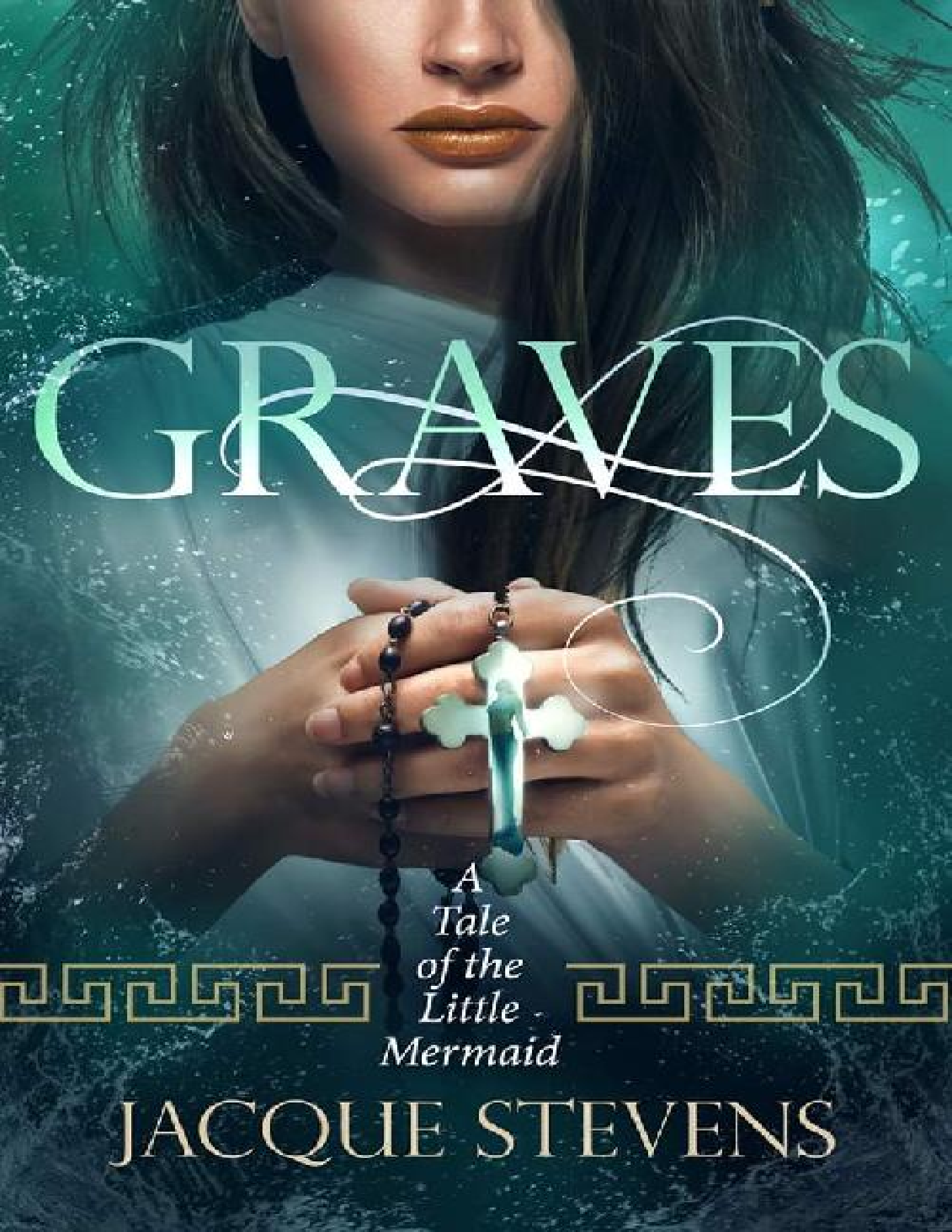
GRAVES
A Tale of the Little Mermaid
JACQUE STEVENS

GRAVES

A TALE OF THE LITTLE MERMAID (BOOK TWO)

JACQUE STEVENS

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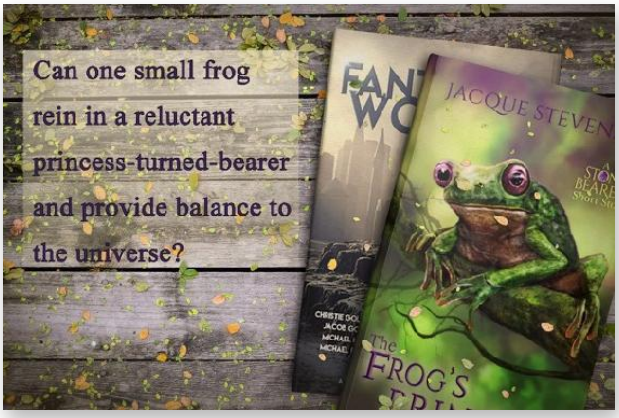

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Author’s Note
Storms

Excerpt: Storms
What are HighTower Fairytales?
About the Author
Also by Jacque Stevens:

CHAPTER 1

My sister was in the hands of a devil.

He pawed at her. Teased her. Cornered her against the wall.

No one on the darkened street seemed to notice. No one except me. My scowl sharpened as the scent of rotting fish filled my nostrils. Fishermen were the worst of all the devils, and this district was full of the lustful and greedy brutes. Staying in the cracks and shadows of the graffiti-covered buildings, I stalked toward the alleyway with my knife out.

A year ago, I carried this knife all the time. I had intended to murder a prince. I never did—which really shouldn't have been a surprise considering I had never actually trained to use the weapon. Now I had. I spent the last year studying with the Sun Prince of Solis and sparring with the palace guards. The Sun Emperor called me Artemis or Diana after the unbridled Goddess of the Moon and Hunt, the twin sister to the Sun God and the perfect counterbalance for his much-too-clever son. He indulged my wild obsessions and loved to watch his new ward train with the men. I loved that it scandalized all the other women in the palace.

Mostly, I loved scandalizing Princess Helene.

But behind all my training and searching, I knew this day would come. That I would rescue my sisters from the devils and graves of their past, and we would be a family again.

Human again.

Such a task seemed sure to require the study of everything Solis had to offer, and I was eager to learn it all. I knew how to hide the glare of the blade in the shadows of the tall buildings. I knew how to move my feet in

time with the evening crowd so my footsteps wouldn't be noticed. And I knew which bulging veins to stab to bleed this man like a pig for the table.

The only thing I didn't know was why my sister wasn't fighting more.

As a siren, my elder sister killed hundreds of men. After spelling them with her song, she bit their throats and drained their souls. She wasn't a siren anymore, but even as a human, I never would have expected her to act so coyly. After cornering her near an open window, the man reached for her chin, and she barely flinched.

"Leaving so soon? Didn't you save some time for me tonight, Corva? You know you are my favorite." He tried to kiss her lips.

"I don't know." Corva turned her head away from his advances, restlessly pulling at one of her curls. Her short tunic exposed the dark tattoos that marked her time as a siren sworn to the God of the Deep. It also exposed more of her tan skin and soft curves, giving the man's eager hands far too much access. "I have some things to do, and you really tired me out last time."

The man laughed, still peppering kisses down her neck. "You loved it."

"Yes, but a girl needs a break every now and again. Maybe ask Catra?"

"Don't be a tease. You know I'll make it worth your while."

"Well, perhaps . . ."

I plunged forward, stepping into the light of the open window. The man was taller than me, so my knife hovered over the largest and easiest target: his protruding gut. "Leave her alone."

A furrowed line appeared on the man's forehead. He was confused, but I would not wait for him to understand the threat. I pressed forward. My sister jerked in front of the man, pushing my arm away. I cursed Hades and the rest of the gods and goddesses as my knife came back with only a few strings of cloth and a trickle of blood.

The man still squealed like I had butchered him.

My sister took on the scolding voice of a parent. "Ari? What are you doing?"

"That she-devil nearly gutted me," the man cried. "Where's the guard?"

I hoped he called the guard. I knew all of them. Or at least they would all know me. Just coming here without a full escort had been a challenge.

"I want her flayed! I want her—"

"Calm down." Another one of my sisters, Catra, stuck her head out of the open window, called by the noise. Her curls and dark complexion

matched her twin in every measure. “It’s our sister.”

“Half sister,” Corva quickly added.

We were all half sisters. Mother never used the same man more than once. The so-called twins only seemed so close because they were born in the same year, and their fathers were related. My father, a poet, hadn’t blessed me with their curves or high cheekbones, but we were sisters and had never cared to make any special distinction from that before.

None of this was making sense. The twins grew up with me on Mother’s island. Alone. Then they spent over two years as sirens before I broke their curse. I knew how hard it was to live in Solis after being apart from society for so long. I had come to help them, to save them from any unsavory individuals who would prey on their ignorance.

But they were acting like I had only come to annoy them.

Corva and I did nothing but stare at each other until Catra hopped over the window ledge to stand in the alley next to us. She swayed as she walked and put her hands on her tilted hips. “Ari, could you be a dear and stop scaring the nice man?”

In what world was this a “nice man”? I wouldn’t believe that for a second, but her words had the desired effect. My knife-wielding hand lowered to mark my confusion.

Catra nodded her approval, turning back to the others. “You see?” she purred and patted the man’s arm. “It’s just a misunderstanding. We’d appreciate it so much if you didn’t trouble the guard with this.”

Instantly, the man stopped squealing. I knew I hadn’t hurt him that badly. “How much?” he asked.

Catra took back her hand and looked at her twin pointedly.

Corva sighed. “Give us a moment? Then I’ll meet you upstairs.”

The man smirked and went inside the building. The opening and closing door let out the sound of more drunken chatter and even a few crude moans.

My mouth made the motions of a landed trout. When I first came to Solis, a fisherman had mistaken me for a working woman. My attempts to stab him were even more clumsy than this, but the conclusion had been better. He let go, and I ran. My sisters could run.

Didn’t they want to?

“You’re still going with him? Willingly?” I asked, finally finding the right words.

“Of course, Ari.” Corva leaned back against the wall and smoothed out her too-short tunic like a badge of honor. “He’s one of my best clients. I was only hoping to fetch a higher price this time, but now, I’ll have to throw him a few freebies. Gia is going to be so upset, that old goat.”

“Gia?” I didn’t know a Gia.

“Our madam, but we won’t have to work for her long. If you can refrain from stabbing the rest of our clients, we’ll have our own rooms soon.”

With her words, all the scattered pieces came together, but I didn’t care for the picture they shaped. This was a brothel, and my sisters weren’t being mistaken as working women.

They *were* working women.

“You’re doing this for money?” I asked.

“Everyone needs money, and we were sirens. What other skills do you think we have?” Catra ran her hand up and down her tattooed arm.

“But I could help you.” I finally put my knife back in my belt, though I still resented that I hadn’t had the chance to use it properly. “The emperor acknowledged me as a daughter of Cypari. He could do the same for you.” Mother might have been a siren, but she had also been a princess.

We were all princesses of Cypari—an island nation that had recently been brought under the sovereignty of the greater Empire of Solis. I had been formally named a ward of the emperor, and my sisters should be freewomen of the court as well.

Respectable women with no need to soil themselves this way.

But my sisters didn’t even wait one moment before they were both shaking their heads. “We’re half sisters,” Corva said again. “We don’t even look alike. No one has to know we share the proper blood.”

“Has to know? You don’t want them to?” I tried to remove the hurt from my tone.

“You might put up your nose, but we built this ourselves, and that’s the way we want it.”

I looked from one twin to the other. They couldn’t *both* feel this way. I didn’t want to believe it, but Catra, the younger of the pair, nodded in confirmation.

“We’re happy with our lot, and we assumed you were too. Where is your prince? Shouldn’t you be with him?”

That came as a final blow. They already knew I lived with Erys, and they never tried to come see me? It had been a year—a full year of

searching and worrying. After I had broken Mother’s shrine and their bond to the God of the Deep, I had been so afraid that my sisters would be lost to the waves. I knew they would be human again, but I didn’t know where they would land. If I had, I certainly would have come to them sooner.

It seemed they hadn’t shared the same sentiment at all, but they weren’t my only sisters.

“I just want to see Serena.”

Corva nodded and pushed away from the wall as if that should end our discussion. “Give her our best when you do.”

“She isn’t here with you?”

Catra sighed, resting her hand on the windowsill. “She is supposed to be, but she hardly ever lasts a full night. We don’t always know where she goes. Sometimes, she stays away for days before checking in on us again. Drives Gia batty, but we can manage. We just worry.”

“You worry about her?” That would be a change as well. The twins had always been a bit flighty, but Serena was the eldest of the sisters I still had left alive. The designated worrier.

“Yes. She is our sister,” Catra said. Apparently, Serena still got the distinction of a full sister. “Do you really think Serena would be happy in a place like this?”

I couldn’t picture Serena being happy at all. Serena had been kind but not happy.

And if she was the only one still unhappy, perhaps she was the only one I could still hope to save.

CHAPTER 2

I had grown up on a graveyard.

I didn't always know it, but I loved to explore our small island and was bound to discover the secrets of that dark cavern at some point. That point came when I was a long-limbed girl of about eight summers. I was hiding from Titera—our eldest sister. She was already a siren and had caught a fish with her bare hands, snapping its bones. She did it with pride, telling us how swearing to the God of the Deep had increased her physical prowess in every measure. But I ran to the caverns to hide from her. My horror increased with every step, driving me farther than I had ever gone before—past the columns and statues my mother had carved into her shrine. Past the icon to her god, a bare-chested man covered in hair and holding a trident. Past the shelf of urns and the underground river that made the whole place musty and cold.

I ran and ran until something like a stick crunched under my feet, piercing my bare soles with its dry, white shards. I puzzled over them in the dark.

Then moonlight shone past the clouds, trickling through a hole in the cavern's ceiling, leading my gaze to the grinning face of a skull with empty sockets.

The ground was littered with bones. Human bones. Hundreds and hundreds of them.

My breath caught. I couldn't say how long I sat there trembling, but Serena was the one to come and search for me. Though only seven years older, she had always been my caregiver more than Mother. "Arianna! Ari!"

she called, but the horror of this dark place had cowed me into silence, and I didn't answer her. She nearly tripped over my stooped form.

"Ari, what are you doing down there? Come with me." She pulled at my arm, but I wouldn't come. Not with her. Not with any of my sisters. What scared me more than the bones themselves was the knowledge of how they had come to be there.

Titera was a murderer, and she wasn't the only one.

I wiped my cheeks. "Is it true what Titera said? Will you be leaving, becoming one of them soon?" That had been the whole purpose of Titera's bloody demonstration. She had been congratulating Serena on the anniversary of her birth—telling her of the wonderful things to come in the next year.

Serena would kill her first man and sacrifice his heart to the God of the Deep.

She would become a siren.

Serena avoided the remnants of death around us and looked only at me. Her voice was even but distant. Perhaps resigned. "Well, I am fifteen. Titera and Vi made the change at sixteen."

I hadn't remembered that, but it was no wonder. There was almost a twelve-year gap between me and Vi. Two more years between me and Titera. I hardly remembered my two elder sisters as anything but sirens. And our mother made the change long before any of us were born.

"But then who will be here with me?" I asked, a desperate tremor to my voice.

"Corva and Catra, of course. And I'll still come and look in on you."

"You won't. The others don't." At least not very often.

Once they bonded with the sea, nothing else seemed to matter.

"I will, and I'll bring the others with me." Serena had to make that promise over and over again just to get me to leave the caverns, but she kept her word. Even after becoming a siren, she visited me at my island and dragged all the others with her. That became a mixed blessing. I saw more of my sisters, but also more of their bloody deeds.

My family of sirens didn't just snap the bones of fish. They slew all the men I found in that mass grave, and countless more they simply lured to the sea to drown and become meals for other sea creatures. The twins adapted a bit quicker than I, but for all of us, death became a part of life. Not so horrible. My mother told us that men were monsters, and it was only natural

that sirens and other noble sea creatures should want to feed on their blood and souls.

I mostly believed her. Then, after the twins, I reached my fifteenth year. Time for me to make the change myself. Only then did things start to unravel again.

When I fell in love with the prince I was meant to kill.

This turned out to be the most fortunate thing that could have happened, because the Sun Prince of Solis loved me too—just not in the way I had initially intended. Erys pushed for his father to recognize me as a royal ward of the palace. He helped me destroy the dark shrine and even killed Titera to defend me.

He called himself my brother, and I loved him desperately.

But without him, what would I have become? And what guilt would I feel if I, after becoming a siren, regained my human form? Those questions and dark memories made it clear where I would find my sister, and that I would have to be the one to call and call until I found her and brought her home.

My pale sister seemed almost a ghost herself, kneeling next to a grave. Serena wore a short tunic and the same dark tattoos the twins carried, but her father was a northern sailor who had given her hair a golden sheen none of the rest of us had.

I was so relieved that I had been right, that I found her, that I walked right up to her and spoke without a bit of tact. “Are you looking for them? The names of the men you killed?” Their bodies would have been lost to the sea, but a few might have empty graves erected in their honor. “Have you found any of them?”

She didn’t even glance up. Like she had expected my presence here. Her eyes were dry, her voice hollow. “Ari, I killed hundreds of men, perhaps thousands, but I only remember a few of their names. Anyone in this graveyard could be here because of me.”

I couldn’t deny that. “And does seeing the graves make it any easier?”

“No.”

“Then why do you do it?”

She turned her head. “Perhaps I owe them my misery.”

“You don’t.” That was one point I could firmly put to rest. “I mean, I don’t know who the men were either, but I know you. You never would have hurt anyone if you weren’t a siren. The monster who killed those men is gone.”

“I’m still the same person, Ari. I was human when I made my first kill.”

“Aides.” I hadn’t met him or witnessed his death, but Serena had shared the basics of the story with me last year. My sister loved him, but she still had believed many of my mother’s ideas about men and killed him. She had been pressured into it in ways that made my stomach churn.

The full horror of that tale was what made me decide I would rather kill my own mother than join her.

And in a way, I had. After I had broken the urns of hearts in her shrine, Mother transformed back into an old woman—too old. The crone had stumbled on the stone, falling into the underground river and shattering her brittle bones.

I shook the dark memory away and tried again. “So, is that who you are looking for? Aides?”

Serena didn’t answer.

“You haven’t found him?”

I was almost relieved when she bowed her head. It was for the best. If she found out more details about the man she loved, she wouldn’t feel any sense of relief. Just more guilt and grief.

I held down my hand to her. “We should leave. The men are dead. Aides is dead, but we are not. We can become new people and start again. You, me, and the twins.”

“You saw the twins?” She sighed, like she already knew how that interaction would have gone. “Don’t judge them so harshly. They only know one way to be.”

She hadn’t taken my hand, so I brought it back to my chest. I rubbed my arms together as I sank down next to her. “You did that. You protected them.” It was a strange form of protection, but it was true. Serena made sure the twins never felt the conflict she did. They were raised with only one view on men that carried over with them now. For the twins, men would always be nothing more than something to play with and feed on. The only difference now was they took money instead of blood.

Their souls remained the same.

Because Serena had that conflict of conscience, her world seemed nothing but a line of graves. How could I help her see past all that? I only caused one death, the death of my mother, and those images still haunted me.

I sat with her for a long time, but nothing came to me. I didn’t know how to help her. I just hoped that someday, I would find a way to protect my sister and give her the same peace she wanted for the rest of us.

CHAPTER 3

My guards weren't happy I had slipped out again. Particularly Jonas.

My knife still miserably unused, I barely reached the steps to the seaside palace when his hand clamped onto my shoulder. He kept it silently rested there until we reached my bedchamber, like he thought I would try to slip away again. But even if I had wanted to avoid him, I was too tired to try. The brothel and graveyard where I had found my sisters were outside the capital and near a lower harbor port several leagues from the palace. It had taken me all night to return home. The light of dawn streamed through my window as Jonas shooed all the other guards out. And he did look cross. He towered over me with a javelin strapped loosely to his back. All his muscles and even the neck scar under his beard were taut as he turned around.

I slumped on the foot of my bed and tried to explain. "I had to see my sisters."

Jonas stayed silent. Unreadable. Then he held up his hands and signed his words with a grave look. "I should have been with you. I could have helped."

"I was just talking to them." I signed the words and spoke—as was my habit with Jonas.

He instantly deflated, lowering his shoulders before making another quick series of signs. "I cannot talk, but I still could have helped."

Sick horror filled me at the sight. That was not what I meant at all!

I loved hand-speaking with Jonas. In some ways, it was the best thing about him. He didn't stand stiff or shout out demands like other guards. He made his feelings known in a dramatic, beautiful dance of brisk fingers and

wide expressions. A ray of color in an otherwise dreary palace of far too much formality. Learning his language had been a necessity for the months I had spent without my voice, but now, I signed and spoke and embraced every part of my new life.

Well, not quite every part, but that was for the best. I didn't want to summon a lightning storm by mistake. I just wanted Jonas to hear me.

"It's not like that. I didn't leave you because you can't speak. I just . . . wasn't sure how my sisters would respond to a man." I thought it might make them nervous. It seemed the opposite was true, but it still would have caused a problem.

My sisters might not fear men, but they certainly didn't respect them.

Jonas nodded his fist, but traces of hurt remained in his eyes. "And? How are they?"

"They are . . . working." I patted my fists together at the wrists.

He made the same sign back at me with his eyebrows raised. "Working?"

I didn't know the sign for my sisters' occupation, and I didn't want to know.

Jonas was mute, not deaf. I could have stopped signing and said the word out loud, but I didn't want to do that either. Saying the word would only make it more real.

"Working," I signed and said again, certain Jonas would catch my meaning regardless. There weren't many occupations a woman could have outside of her own household. "They say they are happy. I just don't think they know any other way to be, and they don't want my help."

"I know the feeling."

I circled my chest earnestly. "Please stop pouting."

At my command, he slowly raised his shoulders. "Fine. You not want my help because your sisters are strange about men. I understand." He flicked one finger by his temple to make the sign. "So, why not ask Janessa to talk to them? She knows everyone and can help them find more options."

I blinked. I hadn't even thought of that. Maybe my sisters needed more than I could offer them, but still I hesitated. I loved Janessa. She had the most engaging, bubbly personality anyone could ask for. But she didn't know my past. I never wanted her to. She was Jonas's eldest sister and—I just wanted her to love me. To keep squealing and gushing whenever she saw me with her baby brother, who I knew she loved more than breath. If

she knew, if she met my harlot sisters, she might never let me see him again. I couldn't risk that.

If I had my way, Jonas wouldn't know all he knew about my family either.

"Maybe. I just think this is something I have to fix on my own." And once I did, once my sisters were happy and acceptable to polite society, maybe then we could plan some big family get-together, and I would finally know what to do with the rest of my life.

"Does everything have to be fixed before you can be happy?" Jonas looked so sad when he signed the words.

That wasn't right. I wasn't trying to push him away. I just wished . . . that I was better for him. That I was better for me. I searched and searched for a new purpose for myself after breaking free from my mother's influence, but I still felt so lost. Finding my sisters again, that was supposed to lead to all the answers and missing pieces I was still searching for.

I reached for his hand. "Jonas, I—"

"Ari!"

We sprang away from each other, and I winced at the prince's voice. His presence would only bring more trouble. "Did you tell him?" I silently signed before Erys could come past the white columns that flanked the curtained entryway.

"That you left?" Jonas shook his fist in the same way others shook their heads. "No. If Prince knew you were out at night alone in *that* neighborhood—death." He mimed his throat being cut.

I let out a sigh of relief. Erys *probably* wouldn't kill anyone, but he would be upset with me too, just like Jonas.

One interrogation was more than enough for one day. I hadn't even slept or eaten yet.

The prince still glared at Jonas as he came in. "What is he doing in here?" Erys didn't wait for an answer before he started signing his words to Jonas. His thick curls, the color of wet sand, bounced as he sprang on his toes to try to match Jonas's height. "Out! And don't let me catch you alone in here again! I can still hang you from the palace walls whenever I please!"

Jonas hit his chest in the traditional salute, bowing himself out like any good soldier should, but I had to try very hard not to laugh. The two boys might be near the same age of seventeen, but they didn't look it. Even in the last year, Erys's voice hadn't lowered much, and his previous attempt to

grow a beard had been so pathetic that he had shaved it all off and insisted he liked it that way. And he was so short and slender and inclined to jumping about that he looked like a starling chasing off a lion.

I shook my head. “Really, Erys? You like Jonas.”

Erys was still scowling at the empty curtain. “I liked him better when he stayed out of your room. He hasn’t asked me or my father for your hand yet.”

“That’s good because he can’t have it. No one can. I’m not ready.” I was sixteen. Just because Erys married a near-stranger at that same age didn’t mean I had to. I might be a princess, but I wasn’t the heir to the empire like he was. Artemis, who the emperor called me after, was a virgin goddess, and I could be one as well for a time.

“And I completely support that.” Erys came back to sit next to me on the bed. “No boys in your room. You can have eunuch guards from now on.”

“Eunuch?”

“Yeah, you know . . .” He squinted his eyes, then frowned. “Or you don’t. Honestly, this is part of the problem. There’s still a lot of things you don’t know. I *do* like Jonas. I picked him for your guard because I didn’t think he would take advantage, but there is your reputation to consider as well. Princesses, any noble lady, just can’t have boys up in their rooms alone.”

“You’re up here alone.” And sitting on my bed, I might have added.

Erys looked completely scandalized at the thought. “You’re my sister.”

“You can say that all you want, but that doesn’t mean they won’t gossip to your bride about it.” The gossip had already reached my ears as well, all the whispered rumors that the girl the Solian prince called “his sister” was merely a mistress he was too proud to admit to, but his fussy princess bride might be the only one to care. I understood my own morals and the nature of my relationships, and that was enough for me.

The rest of the empire could pound sand if they didn’t like it.

But some of the princess’s sensibilities must have finally rubbed off on Erys because he leapt from the bed even as he yelled. “My bride sent me up here! Helene said she didn’t think you packed anything yet. And why is that?”

“I thought we were leaving for Cypari tomorrow.” And to be honest, I wasn’t looking forward to the trip.

“We are. Her parents are here now to travel with us. I want you to meet them.”

Her parents? Why would I want to meet Helene’s parents? “I’ll see them tomorrow. And honestly, I don’t have that much to pack.”

“Too late. I brought Ruth. She’s right outside and said she would be thrilled to help you.”

I doubted that. Ruth might have said the words because Erys was the Sun Prince of Solis and extremely bossy, but I knew for certain all of Helene’s handmaidens hated me. They hated me when I had worked as one of them and hated me more now that I had surpassed them.

Erys had offered me my own slaves from the palace, but I preferred to keep few possessions and continued to care for myself. It was what I was used to, and I would never trust that they wouldn’t turn on me—putting dirt in my underthings out of spite.

If Ruth packed my things, I would have to recheck every garment I had.

Erys’s eyes went wide as I continued to frown. “Just come down and meet them. *Please.*”

“Fine,” I said. If I was the moon, that boy was certainly the sun—so earnest and stubborn I couldn’t resist him. I never could. “Just don’t expect me to be happy about it.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” He grinned and ran to yell into the hallway again. “Ruth! You can come in now. Oh, and, Jonas, you can come back too. Just keep more of your friends with you next time, got it?”

There was a pause as Jonas must have signed something in response.

“No, I won’t make them eunuchs. Is that why they’re hiding?” Erys rolled his eyes back at me like he hadn’t been the one to cause all the trouble in the first place. “I have to fix this now too. But I’ll see you down there.”

As he raced away, the curtain flapping behind him, I flopped back onto my bed with a sigh. I wouldn’t get a moment to sleep with the parade of people flowing in and out of my bedchamber. And downstairs, Helene’s parents were waiting.

My mouth soured, and my eyes rolled up toward the ceiling. I couldn’t wait.

CHAPTER 4

"Ari!" The emperor's voice boomed out as I left my guards and crossed the crowded banquet hall toward the head of the front table. The Sun Emperor of Solis had Erys's same olive shading, but his curls had grayed, and he had a much larger build, almost matching the idolized mural of the nearly nude man spearing a manticore behind him. The lounging couch creaked as he held a goblet loosely in one hand and gestured to the seat at his right side. "Come and save me. He's been talking politics all day." He cupped his mouth as if to hide his words—though his volume remained unchanged. A whisper that wasn't a whisper at all.

The foreign noble on his left frowned sharply in response.

I laughed. "Isn't that what a visiting dignitary is supposed to do?"

The emperor sniffed and took another drink. "No one likes doing what they are 'supposed to do.' I swear, if I forbade it, you would be over there gossiping about hairstyles with Helene." He pointed to the other women sitting farther down the table.

I doubted it. But that had less to do with hairstyles and more to do with Helene. I didn't really hate her anymore, but that girl was boring.

The emperor, though, I usually enjoyed. He was loud and brash and hard to take in large doses, but on occasions like this, he was very entertaining.

"It's enough to make me wish we *had* gone to war," he said. "Between you and me, I think we could have taken them." The emperor winked and put on such a good show one might think he didn't care for the affairs of his provinces at all. Really, he just didn't like having to debate and explain his plans to others. Very much like his son.

And the sour expression of the man beside him told me at once that the foreign dignitary was kin to Helene. He seemed too thin and his voice too high. His beard twisted into a curl, and his nose was permanently raised like he was smelling donkey dung. “So, this is Arianna? The daughter of Miranda?”

The emperor beamed at me. “Yes, this is Ari, our own Goddess of the Moon.”

I flinched at the praise. It might have been a simple jest before, but now it seemed everyone would be expecting me to act like a goddess as well as a princess. And I didn’t know how. The emperor could be as loose as he wanted, but this was a formal meeting. Was I supposed to bow? I was a princess, but he was elder and all the social rules everyone else in this palace took for granted got jumbled in my head all the time.

So I didn’t answer or move at all. Sometimes, I liked to throw popular opinion to the wind, but much more often, it just was easier to do so. I didn’t feel so stupid about not knowing social rules and graces if I could pretend not to care about them.

I also had hoped the man would lose interest if I ignored him, but that part didn’t work.

At his words, the woman beside him turned to peer at me too. Helene’s mother? Really, Helene’s twin with a few gray hairs. “Miranda? She was my great aunt. That would make us . . .”

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“Cousins once removed?” she tried.

Not removed enough. My mother was the princess and heir of Cypari until she became a siren, and these usurpers stole her throne. It was only fitting that they had already been displaced, annexed into Solis with Erys’s marriage to Helene as their only concession.

The woman nodded, agreeing with herself. “And you’re cousins twice removed with Helene. Assuming you are who you claim.”

I frowned, taken aback. The silence lasted for another awkward moment until Erys stood from another corner of the table to speak for me.

“The blade glowed,” he said, pointing to the dagger still securely belted over my richly embroidered stola. No one else at the table had weapons—just Jonas and the other guards standing by the entrance—so that might have been another social misstep, but I never went anywhere without my dagger.

The blade had been blessed to the queen goddess called Hera or Juno and glowed to show royal blood. It was proof of my identity and rank, not just a weapon.

But the woman kept her nose in the air.

“That is a very imprecise measurement. It would glow for any amount of royal blood.”

Erys turned to me. “Why don’t you sing? Cypari royalty are supposed to have the best voices, and Arianna’s voice is very unique.” He winked.

I seethed. How could he suggest that? He knew how much I was still struggling to control that part of myself. And now he had everyone staring at me—all the guards, the servers, the emperor, Helene’s parents, and even Helene herself.

Helene was the last person I wanted to be made a fool in front of.

I quickly sat down and ducked my head. “I . . . I don’t think that would be a good idea.” If they wanted to think I was a liar, that was fine with me. Maybe they would talk to me less.

I fell to silence and forced the emperor to save me, calling for his dinner and some better entertainment. As the minstrels and servers glided in, someone nudged my shoulder. Probably Jonas. He had been standing back with the rest of the guards and palace workers but would have swooped closer with all the pouting I had been doing.

I tried to smile and turned.

Then I screamed and summoned a lightning bolt.

CHAPTER 5

The lightning bolt was outside—just streaking across a cloud. No more harm than a flash of light through the windows and the thundering patter of rain on the roof.

But everyone in the banquet hall stared at me.

It used to be the storms answering my silent cries could go unnoticed but not anymore. “I’m sorry. I just thought I saw . . .” But the man was gone. He couldn’t have been there in the first place. Naman died after my blade showed him to be the son of a Solian prince and a Cypari slave—a royal bastard with opposite linage to my own.

I was the daughter of a Solian poet and a Cypari princess. The only difference was that I never swore myself to become a siren to the God of the Deep. Naman had (or at least to become whatever the male version of a siren was) and sought to use his powers to restart the war between the two nations that had wronged him. He had tried to stop the marriage treaty between Erys and Helene—even enlisting my family’s help. I could have killed any sort of man to become a siren; it didn’t have to be a prince. Naman was the reason my mother had chosen Erys for me.

But when I decided to remain human and defend Erys, Naman had been exposed and thrown into a lion pit. The man was dead, and I had no reason to scream about him. I let my voice fall, half-hoping I could retreat to one corner, and everyone would forget about me again.

No chance of that. Everyone from Cypari seemed to be whispering together about me now. “She has Miranda’s curse,” Helene’s mother said, anger flashing in her hard brown eyes. “And this is the girl you want to put on our council?”

I followed her gaze back to Erys. “What?” I asked.

He coughed on his drink, then tried for a smile. “Yeah, maybe we should talk about that.”

Erys stared out a columned archway as the palace slaves dashed back and forth through the hall, trying to appease our foreign guests. After the footsteps faded, and we were alone again on the balcony, he turned and sighed. “Well, that was a mess.”

I turned with him, staring out at the sea below us. The balcony had been Erys’s place of refuge before, but I had claimed it as my own. It was an escape from the chaos of the palace and the city and anywhere else I didn’t quite belong.

For so long on my mother’s island, the sea seemed a dark and repressive barrier, but lately, I found myself craving the familiarity of the empty waves. The spray of the water and the rhythmic sound of their movement against the shore was the only home I had known for so long. I had never been a siren, but it still seemed a part of me somehow. Perhaps it always would be.

“You know I didn’t mean it.” I curled my arms together as if I could hold in my traitorous gift that way. I had barely dared raise my voice in the last year in fear of something like this. Somehow, I needed to learn to control it better. After all, with Erys as my brother, I was bound to be yelling again at some point. “You want to leave me in Cypari? Force me onto their council?” Why did he think anyone would go along with that?

“You’re their princess,” he said, leaning against the banister beside me. He pointed at the sea like he could see all the way to Cypari. “It’s your right to be on their council, and now that we are supposed to be allies, I need a representative there I can trust. But you wouldn’t have to stay there all the time. We can visit back and forth, and you can keep Jonas with you.”

Keep Jonas? He wasn’t a dog. Not even a slave.

“Did you even ask him?” I asked. His family, his whole life was here.

Erys laughed. “If you go, Jonas will go. I’d have to tie him to the wall to stop him.”

“How do you know that if you didn’t ask him?”

Erys's eyebrows rose like I was being slow on purpose. "He won't let me promote him out of your guard. He'll have to, eventually, or he can't marry you. You're a princess. He has to be a general at least."

Not that again. I liked Jonas. I really did—in some ways he was the only thing in this world I felt completely sure of. But with everything else in my life so unsettled, I couldn't make that kind of commitment to someone else.

And I couldn't let Erys manipulate me like this. Not again.

Erys continued with the bluntness of a steel pole. "You know he's going to ask you soon, right? Are you going to have an answer for him?"

I scowled. It wasn't Erys's business, and he wasn't going to distract me so easily. "That is not the point! Just because you are the prince and can tie people to walls doesn't mean you should yank people around without even thinking of them."

"I *am* thinking of them—of you."

And that really was the upsetting part. I could rage all I wanted, but Erys didn't get it. He thought he was helping. The bull-headed tyrant always had the best of intentions, making him simultaneously the sweetest and most insufferable person I knew. And since he was the prince, no one ever challenged him on it, leaving him free to keep his end game to himself.

He had made some clever plan and would keep on pushing until we both went mad.

"You want to know about your past and who you are," he said. "Cypari is a part of that. So just try it out for a few months. That's all I hoped for."

I knew what he hoped for. That somehow, he would be able to get me down to Cypari, and suddenly, without him even saying anything, I wouldn't want to leave. I would help him make more friends and secure their alliance. Marry Jonas and have the rest of my life wrapped up in fairy-tale bliss.

But the last meeting should have proved that I had no skills in diplomacy.

Their alliance would go smoother without me, and I couldn't go with Erys if I wanted to keep helping my sisters and finding my own path. "No, I'm not going. They don't like me, and I don't like them." They just called my voice a curse. Miranda's curse. I had never heard my mother's gift called such a thing. But I supposed it made sense. In Cypari, Mother had been raised not to use her gifts, as it was seen as something unholy. But

when Mother embraced all unholiness as a siren, she flaunted the power. Of course the people she left behind still hated it.

And hated me for using it too.

Erys rubbed his temples under his dark curls. “Well, they’re never going to learn to like you if you hide up here.”

“I don’t care if they like me. I can figure things out on my own and make my own friends.”

“Really? Name one friend you’ve made besides me and Jonas.”

“Janessa,” I said at once.

“Jonas’s family doesn’t count. Neither does mine or yours.” Erys folded his arms and stood on the tips of his sandals so he could actually look down on me. “If you’re not coming with me, I’d like to know what it is you plan on doing here that’s so important.”

I cursed under my breath. I was sure *normal* princes of vast empires didn’t concern themselves enough to know the names of their guards’ sisters—especially since Erys had to learn to sign in order to talk to Jonas. But there was never anything normal about Erys. He built all his schemes by knowing everything that happened around him—intellectually if not always empathetically—so he would also know if I lied. Any plan I came up with had to be near as good as the one he had been concocting if I wanted to convince him I should stay.

It took a bit of thinking, but I liked my next answer even better. “Leah.”

“Leah?”

“Leah. She’s a senior nun at the Amerstead Abbey. I liked a lot of the nuns when I lived there, and they can help me learn to control my powers better than anyone in Helene’s family.” The nuns were the first ones to help me after I came to Solis. They really would be the perfect ones to ask about my sisters and the “holiness” of my gifts, and they were so isolated from the rest of the world that Janessa, Helene’s parents, or anyone else would never have to know about it.

Erys paused, rubbing his nonexistent beard, but then he laughed. “All right. Fine. Stay with the nuns. They’ll keep Jonas out of your rooms better than I could.” He turned to leave, stopping with his hand on one of the columns. “You know I love you, right? That I just worry?”

“Don’t. I’ll be fine.”

He waited. “And? You love me?”

“Yes, you goat. Now go!” I yelled, as if determined to be rid of him, but then I laughed after he was gone. Erys drove me mad at times, but in moments like this, I thought the emperor was right. Like the sun and the moon, the scholar and the huntress, my so-called brother and I couldn’t be more different, but that just made us the perfect pair.

CHAPTER 6

Erys made me take my guards, a few female slaves, and a cart to travel to the monastery. My own little army. I asked Erys if he thought we were laying siege to the place, but he just reminded me that I was a princess and his sister and how generous he was being by letting me travel “alone” in the first place. That ended that discussion. I wasn’t about to tell him I had walked nearly the same path by myself less than two nights ago.

Instead, I told the girls to ride in the cart for me and took my restlessness out by walking every step of that uneven road. It had been a year, but I still didn’t love all the crowds I had to deal with as a princess. Erys wasn’t wrong when he said I didn’t have a lot of friends. Growing up on Mother’s island, I was just used to being alone and doing things for myself.

The jam-packed cobblestone of the wide city streets dissolved into a smaller dirt path with only a few other donkey carts and travelers walking by. I looked out on the surrounding goat fields and olive groves. The grass moved with the same freedom as the waves, but perhaps not quite the same harshness. Perhaps they led to a place between the palace and the sea where I might really belong. I still hadn’t seen enough of this world to know, leading me to wonder what kind of life I might have picked for myself if I hadn’t gotten involved with Erys.

Or rather, if I hadn’t been born the daughter of a siren and set upon him.

There might not be any real hope of changing it now, but maybe I would have been happier on a small farm or orchard—only a few people and animals around me. No blood or graves or the crushing weight of my high-profile family and all its social pressure.

Maybe I shouldn’t be trying to be a princess at all—birthright or no. Without Erys, I never would have. I would have remained a lone and silent huntress.

Completely and totally . . . *alone*.

I shook my head. Maybe that wasn’t what I wanted either. I just didn’t know anymore.

I became so lost in these thoughts, and Jonas had to clap and kick a small rock at me to get me to focus on his moving hands. That was the gift and curse of hand-speaking; he could have been trying to get my attention for hours without my notice.

“You mad at me?” he asked with his eyebrows raised.

I blinked and shook my fist. “No. Why?”

“We fought—because you left the palace without me. Now you not talking, and . . .” He stopped signing and looked at his hand, a slight flush to his cheeks.

I smiled. That was Jonas. He signed his words, but so often, I could tell what he was thinking without them. He wanted me to hold his hand. He just couldn’t admit it. That wasn’t how our game was played. I would grab his hand while we walked, and he would give an exaggerated sigh. He would point back at the other guards like it was scandalous for someone else to see my preference—like they didn’t already know. Or he would act like I was in the way when he tried to sign or pick something up.

That, of course, only made me hold on even more stubbornly.

His hand was mine. He knew it, and I knew it, so I quickly claimed it again. It might be childish, but I loved the feel of our rough hands clasped together. Or his wide arms around me. We hadn’t gone much farther than that, but it was all I needed to feel grounded and at peace again. I might not belong anywhere else, but with him, I somehow did.

Relief filled his gaze. He quickly moved his spear to his back and used his other hand to make modified, one-handed signs, not even bothering to pretend he minded. “You not mad?”

“No. I was just . . . thinking.” I had been thinking so much I had completely forgotten about our last “fight,” but, again, that was Jonas. What he called a “fight,” I would call a “mild discussion.” I still would do my best to put it right. Jonas was the only stable part of my life at the moment, something I was determined to keep. “And I’m sorry I left the palace without telling you. I know I shouldn’t have. I just . . . I have a lot I’m

trying to figure out right now, and I thought having you there would make it harder.” I loved the brightness of his world, but I never wanted to show him the full darkness and horror of mine.

Jonas looked around and then signed again when he was sure no one else was looking. Most of the other guards knew at least a few signs—not just to talk with Jonas, but because it had proved to be a very effective way to communicate while fighting sirens. “Because of what Prince said? You need not worry. I not going to ask you. Not yet. I know you not ready.”

“You were listening?” My face burned at the thought.

“I’m a mute guard. I’m the best at eavesdropping.”

I laughed. “Full marks.” I supposed having that already out there did make things easier. An almost welcome distraction. Jonas wouldn’t make me talk about anything I wasn’t ready for, but there were still parts of Erys’s plan I wanted to discuss. “Did you hear everything? Even the bit about Erys wanting to move us to Cypari?”

He shrugged. “That not be so bad. I hear they have better fish.”

Fish? “But your family and your . . . *life.*”

“I’m a soldier. I go where Prince commands. Or Princess. Family understands that.” He frowned. “You not want me to come?”

“I—I just don’t want to go.” And I hoped that when Erys left, he would take all his pressure and guilt trips with him. But Jonas could be a walking guilt trip sometimes. He was just so *good* that it was hard to pout or behave selfishly in his presence.

I still wanted to try.

“They all hate me because of my mother and I . . . I just don’t want to deal with them,” I said. “Why should I have to?”

Jonas paused before answering. “You not have to prove anything to them, but if they know you better, it might help.”

“Help what?”

“Bring more peace and unity to the empire. Not everyone pleased with the treaty just because Prince and Helene got married.”

I supposed that was true. Erys named me a princess, so maybe helping him build a more stable rule should be part of that package, but how was I supposed to make Helene’s parents like me? It wasn’t like they were wrong. I did have a deadly gift I could barely control. My sisters were still little better than the sirens they were before.

If I really was going to help Erys, I had to be someone people could actually *like.*

I had to get better and do better and—

Jonas grimaced before I realized how much I had been squeezing his fingers. And he wouldn't complain, the poor boy. For both our sakes, I had to stop.

All this thinking was getting me nowhere, but I knew only one way to silence it.

"Come. Let's race." I tugged on his hand one more time before letting go.

Jonas raised his eyebrows, but I knew he would follow. It might not be the most dignified way to travel, and the rest of our party might curse my name, but Jonas and I trained together all the time. I learned to fight not just because I hoped those skills would come to protect me and my sisters, but also because the exercise was the best release I had found.

Arms pumping, legs burning, all my worries fading away.

I only made it a few strides before Jonas was at my side. He could have passed me, but he wouldn't. So much for racing. I still wanted a challenge, so I lengthened my stride anyway. Jonas rolled his eyes and matched me again. I stuck out my tongue, and that became our new game. Every time he reached my side, I slowed or sped off again.

"You . . . bad . . . princess," he signed, his chest heaving. He thrust out his fist, making a Y of his thumb and little finger. "Stay."

I shook my head, but I smiled. As much as I worried about being a "bad" princess around anyone else, I knew I didn't have to with him. He knew who my sisters were; he knew who I was. He might lecture and worry, but he still followed me like it was an honor.

He wanted me to hold his hand.

And I wanted . . . I wanted . . .

I watched the movement of his muscles, the rhythm of his run. Distant for a moment, then at my side again. He raised his eyebrow, waiting for me to dash off, but I didn't.

I wasn't sure what I wanted for a moment, watching him more than my own feet.

I fumbled a step, the ground unlevel. I fell, and so did he. In a quick and awkward scramble, he rolled over me, trying to cushion my fall without

crushing me. Surrounding me. Holding me. I felt the kiss of his sweat, the warmth of his skin, the rhythm as he breathed.

I lingered, my eyes tracing the curve of his collarbone, the length of his bearded jaw.

His rich brown eyes were focused on me, merely concerned at first, but then a question appeared. My heart jumped, and I knew without words what he wanted, what he probably had been wanting for a while now but would never dare ask.

Stay, his eyes begged me, with more depth and soul.

I felt the grass under my back, the place between city and sea. I wanted to belong somewhere so much, to carry this feeling around me everywhere. The feeling Jonas had always given to me. Our hands and arms fit so well together, what of our lips? Our hearts? Our . . .

Curse Erys. Why did he have to be right? Despite my distraction, a question *had* grown up between me and Jonas, but did I have an answer?

Jonas leaned forward, waiting again for my response.

If I ran, he would follow, but if I stayed . . .

I blinked. A blur of stone behind Jonas became a statue, a cherub. A grave. That was why the ground was unlevel. We had run into the abbey's graveyard and disturbed someone's holy rest. And as careless as I might be with the customs of kings and men, gods were another matter. I would not tempt them to anger needlessly.

This wasn't the time; this wasn't the place. All my former worries were back, stronger than before. My sisters. My dark past. The expectations of Erys and the whole empire.

I couldn't stay. There was too much I still had to see and fix.

I stood and moved away from Jonas. There might still be a question between us, but I couldn't answer it yet.

Cerberus, the large boarhound, came to greet me first with a flurry of licks and a wagging tail. We had to wait for a priest to call the dog off.

"Do you all wish to stay at the monastery?" the priest asked, looking back at the cart and line of servants who had finally caught up to us. He was trying to be delicate, but I could see his eyes widen at our numbers.

I cursed Erys again. The nuns and priests would have accepted me alone without question, but this horde was going to be costly. I pulled out coins, stamped with the prince's face, and hoped Erys would somehow guess my wrath if I spent all the money he had given me. "We can pay for their board. If there is no room here, you can direct them elsewhere."

Priests and normal men weren't that different. The man snagged the coin, apparently deciding there was room for us after all. I let him tell the others where to go while Jonas and I made our way into the central abbey and buildings reserved for the nuns alone.

In the chapel, Sister Leah lit candles around the large crucifix, lighting up the altar for the evening prayers. Her long black habit rustled on the stone as she turned. The age spots on her round cheeks creased into a smile, and I felt the warmth of her brown eyes. "Ari! What brings you here?"

"The prince." I made a face. "He didn't want me staying alone while he is in Cypari. He doesn't think I know enough about the world because I don't know what a eunuch is." I frowned again at the unknown word. "Speaking of which, do you know what a eunuch is?"

Leah pressed her lips together, her eyes flicking to Jonas in her surprise, and it seemed I wouldn't get that answer here either.

"Never mind," I said. "That isn't the only reason I came. Do you have a moment to talk?"

She nodded. We followed her outside as the other nuns started to fill up the benches. I waved to a few of them as we passed—a former novice I had roomed with and an older woman who once snuck me an extra sweet roll from the larder. They didn't try to talk to me, as most still assumed I was as mute as Jonas, but they were smiling. Before meeting them, I never thought anyone serving any god could be so happy and kind.

But then, their crucified god was a lot different from the pitiless God of the Deep.

We stopped once we were near the gravestones, the reminder making everything fresh on my mind again. I dove in without any more delays. "I'm worried about my sisters. I was searching for them, I want to help them, but they really seem to hate me now. I don't even know why." I explained to her our failed encounter and how much I wanted to stab all the men in that brothel and carry my sisters away.

Serena was better and worse. She knew she was unhappy and might accept help, but I had none to give her. I didn't think anyone really did.

Not unless they could bring her boy back from the dead.

Leah only paused for a moment before opening her mouth to answer. A ball of pressure in my gut loosened at the sight. I knew she would be the best one to come to.

She gestured to the dagger at my belt that should have killed a prince.

“Ari, you were born into a life of violence, but saving souls is an entirely different business than stealing them. So, I will tell you what I tell all my girls going out to spread the ministry: Before you can tell someone what they are doing wrong, you must first understand them. You must love them. And show you love them by your actions, by your service toward them.”

“Like you all work in the village?” Besides praying long into the night, I had seen all the nuns work as teachers and healers and a variety of other tasks.

“Yes, but our Lord would have us serve our fellows whether they accept our message for them or not. This isn’t something that can be faked—at least not for long. Next time you go to see your sisters, try only to be their friend. Not their savior.”

I nodded. I could try that. And besides saving my sisters, the failed banquet and my unstable powers had given me a new reason for wanting to see them.

CHAPTER 7

My sister was in the hands of a devil.

Two devils, really. Corva winked and smiled at two different men until one put his money on the table and pulled her past the decorative drapes and columns leading into a back room. The harsh noises and smells of the night before continued. This time, I held onto the knife at my belt until my knuckles went white, but I did nothing to stop it.

I found a table and waited for her to finish and come to me.

I needed to relax my fingers. I needed to smile, to accept them as they were. To love them no matter what they did. I had spent the last few days working at the monastery and repeating the words in my mind until they seemed an inner chant, but I still didn't know if I could heed them.

I hated this place so much.

Catra came first. She crossed the room and scowled, putting down a serving tray in front of me. The bowl of olives and empty wine cups she had gathered from other tables clinked together. "What are you doing here?" She pushed up the sleeve of her disheveled tunic, but it immediately fell down again, showing the unbroken lines of the dark tattoos on her tan skin.

"I'm eating." I pulled out a brass coin with Erys's face on it and grabbed a handful of the olives to demonstrate. Then I grinned, far more than I probably should have. "People still do that here, right?"

"Men do. Woman clients usually prefer to go down the street and hire the young men. Or perhaps you already have?" Catra glanced over her bare shoulder at Jonas. He wouldn't come in, but he was hovering by the front door with his arms stiff.

The boy looked so uncomfortable that no one could accuse him of being a regular.

But all the girls were eyeing him—like sharks closing in on a fresh new kill. He held up one hand from his spear in a flat refusal when one barely dressed girl strayed too near, but since he didn't use his voice, she just giggled with her friends about how "shy" he must be.

Janessa would kill me. I knew bringing him would be a bad idea. He just had been impossible to lose lately; I hadn't wanted to risk another "fight" so soon, not with all the tension still swirling around us. The best I could do was have him promise to stay out of the way.

Corva came out next, her tunic wrinkled and her curls sticking out in odd angles after her last encounter. "Oh, it's you." Her voice was airy, and she swayed a bit while she walked. Perhaps she had been drinking. She sat down and took an olive from her twin sister's tray. "Have you come to scare all our customers away again?"

"No," I said, but the slight dig made me grind my teeth and start my inner chant again. I needed to smile. I needed to love . . . something. Anything. Or maybe just focus on the other information I hoped to gain from them. "I just wondered if you could help me." I reached for another coin. "I could pay you for your time like anyone else."

She raised an eyebrow. "And what does the princess need help with?"

"That's just it. I'm not a princess. No more than you anyway. I wasn't trained for it." I had begun my run of complaints as an easy excuse to engage my sisters in a shared discussion of all my shortcomings, but by the end, some real venom appeared. "And now Erys wants me to do princess things even though he knows damn well that . . ." I stopped and took a breath. I couldn't actually yell if I didn't want to summon another whirlwind. "I can't do it. The only claim I have to royalty is Mother's blood. I have her gift, and I don't know how to control it."

Catra shook her head. "Mother's gift? You are not a siren."

"Not that gift."

Blank stares answered me. Catra wasn't getting it. Corva either. Well, I already showed the whole palace. I could show a few amorous drunks.

I sang a note, low then high. Rain clattered on the roof, and wind gusted through the window and shook the plates.

Catra lifted the tray before her chest like a barrier, the remaining olives and empty cups dropping to the floor. She took in a sharp breath. "Ari . . ."

That was not the reaction I wanted. “What? Can’t you do it too?”

“No. Any gift we had with our voices came and went with the rest of our powers.”

“You can’t . . . then why can I? Why could Mother?” I hadn’t been sure about my sisters, but I knew for certain that Mother had the gift before she became a siren.

They looked at each other, then Corva answered. “I don’t know.”

“Why does no one know?” The words came as a sigh. My sisters were supposed to know something. As sirens, they always had powers and gifts I didn’t have.

At least they had until I . . .

A new idea struck me then like another lightning bolt. And though I still had Sister Leah’s words in my head coaching me onward, a natural empathy swelled inside me that couldn’t be faked. “That’s why you hate me.”

“What?”

“You hate me because I have gifts you don’t. I built a life for myself by destroying yours. Is that how you see it? I took your gifts. I made you human again, and I never asked you.” I had just assumed they would be happier as humans. And maybe I was right to change them regardless, but I had learned plenty about meddling siblings who always thought they knew best.

I only hated it more when the foul prince turned out to be right.

My sisters should despise me.

The twins exchanged another silent look before answering. Then Catra spoke. “Mother didn’t ask us either, you know. Becoming a siren was just expected.”

“We never complained,” Corva said, still nibbling on the same olive she had taken earlier. “It was just who we were. Who we are.”

I nodded. Mother and I had both yanked them around without asking, but Mother was dead, and they could no longer confront her about the injustice. Only I remained to absorb the brunt of their wrath—even their subconscious wrath. “But if you could choose? What would you do?”

Catra frowned, but then she shook her head. “Honestly, Ari, I just don’t know. We were never ones to make grand wishes. That was always you.”

“We accept the life we have and make the best of it,” Corva said. “Try to enjoy it. That’s all we’ve ever done.”

That made me sadder than anything else, knowing that was how the twins truly felt. Did my mother's old edicts so cow them that they never dared to form their own dreams? I had a dozen new dreams every day, more than I could finish in one lifetime.

But I couldn't fix this by giving them my dreams. Just space to find their own.

"Well, if you ever have another dream, I hope you will let me help you. I really don't know if I can or not, but I would like to try."

Catra smirked. "And if our dream is to stay here until we die of some foreign fever?"

I smiled back, unforced. "Then I will take a flower to your graves. You won't be rid of me." I took another fallen olive to my mouth, slowing down every movement until both my sisters laughed with me.

I helped them clean up the fallen dishes, and for a small moment, it seemed like we might be a family again. Fully human again.

The moment of levity was snatched away from me too soon. The madam, Gia, called for my sisters to find new clients, and I couldn't stand to stay in the main room without them. I went to find Jonas at the door. He wrung his hands over his damp tunic, and my nostrils flared—the stink of the nearby harbor clung to him now.

"You?" he asked with his hands before I remembered the rain I had summoned.

I tried not to snicker and circled my chest with my hand to make the sign. "Sorry."

I reached out to hold his hand, and then Jonas shrugged, leaving water droplets hanging from his hair and ears like oyster pearls. It seemed it didn't matter to him if he got rained on as long as he got to follow me and hold my hand.

If only everyone else in my life was so easy to please.

And once our fingers were entwined again, I found myself feeling lighter too. It seemed selfish to drag him through my troubles like this, but I couldn't deny that it had helped.

He was my peace and my center in this desolate harbor.

“How did it go?” Jonas tilted his head back at my sisters’ brothel as we walked together.

“Well, I tried,” I answered. “I don’t know if it helped, but . . .”

I stopped as a pale young woman walked up the street toward us. Tattoos ran up her arms and legs in a familiar pattern.

“Hello, Serena. Are you working here tonight?”

She frowned, and I blanched, hearing the challenge in my voice.

“I mean, it’s fine if you are. I’m not judging.” I honestly felt some relief that she wasn’t out staring at gravestones tonight, but her current occupation wasn’t much better. Or really better at all. And I had already bungled everything so much . . . perhaps changing the subject was my only route forward.

“This is Jonas.” Needing the buffer, I yanked his arm forward. “He’s my . . .” I looked at Jonas, and a new rush of panic rose in my chest. How was I supposed to describe our relationship to her? I didn’t even know how to describe it to myself! And after successfully avoiding thoughts of our near-kiss in the graveyard for so long, all those same anxieties bubbled to the surface again without losing an ounce of their former potency. What did Jonas expect? What did *I* expect? Would we ever recover if those expectations didn’t quite match?

But that was why I always found myself clinging to Jonas. He was my steady center, and he never let me stumble long.

Jonas let go of my hand and signed, crossing his fists in front of his chest and raising his eyebrows. “Guard?” he offered.

Right. The simple explanation. Why couldn’t I have thought of that? “Guard,” I agreed, signing and saying the word out loud.

Serena squinted at our moving hands. “What are you doing?”

I looked down at both Jonas’s and my hands before answering. Our method of communication had become so natural to me sometimes I forgot that others might not recognize it. “Hand-speaking? He doesn’t talk.”

“You have a man who doesn’t talk? What bargain did you make? To which god?”

Silence answered her question.

Then Jonas’s chest heaved, letting out a raspy sound he sometimes made in place of a laugh. Instead of taking offense, that boy had far too much fun with people who spoke out of turn, assuming that since he was mute, he must also be deaf or otherwise incapable of understanding.

My face went red with a mixture of embarrassment and horror as I wished to defend each of them at once. I pushed at Jonas, both to stand in front of him and fend off his unnatural levity. But then my hand was on his chest, and he was grinning like a fool, and my words became even more disjointed. “What? No. It was just—he was attacked as a child, but he did help me when I lost my voice before. He just . . . wanted to be with me if I came to see you again.”

“Because he is your guard?” Despite the carefully selected word, my sister seemed rather skeptical.

“Yes,” I said, no longer looking at the fool boy and holding my arms more firmly at my sides. I had come here to focus on my sisters, not Jonas, and that was exactly what I would do. “And we’re staying with the nuns for the next few months. Their abbey is closer than the palace, so if you and the twins ever wanted to see us, you would be welcome.”

Serena moved back a step. “I have been to their graveyard before, but I don’t trust churches.”

I didn’t blame her for that. Mother was very pious to a very bloody god. “It’s a different sort of church. Would you like to come and see?” That might be a good idea. The best idea. If it worked, then I could get Sister Leah to speak to Serena directly.

I might have made some progress with the twins, but the nuns had so much more experience with this kind of thing.

Serena took a step after us, quicker than I expected. “Perhaps I should. If you are going to be staying there.” Maybe I tapped into her protectiveness as my older sister, but that worked just as well.

“You’ll love it.” I actually had to hold myself back from pouncing at her with the thought. A life as a nun was perfectly respectable, free of men, and had some similarity to my sisters’ role as Valadern’s priestesses. The nuns did service in the village, and if Serena joined them, that might somehow counter the guilt she still carried. It could really be the perfect fit.

But if I sounded too eager, I could scare her off the idea.

I had to start slow. So, as we walked past all the trash and graffiti that layered the streets of this district, I simply told her how I had stumbled into the abbey in the first place and some of my interactions with the people who lived there. How a fat goat had come and spoiled a bundle of food they put out for the poor yesterday. How they sang hymns in the halls but sounded close to goats themselves. How I loved them.

When the earth sank beneath our feet, and we reached the first grave markers near the abbey chapel, some of my other guards ran up to speak to Jonas. They were mostly signing though, so we could continue without pause. Until Jonas grabbed my arm, and I realized I didn't recognize one of the guards—one who panted and held his sides. Had he run through all the daylight hours like that man in the Marathon legends?

"What is it?" I asked.

Jonas dropped my arm and signed. "Emperor want you home. Prince . . . they say Prince is dead."

CHAPTER 8

My breath caught. My sister and the other figures around the church faded from my vision, their noise becoming a distant hum as the world slowed and spun around me. I didn't trust my voice, and it took far too long for my hands to form a single word. I kept shaking my head, waiting for someone to reveal the reason behind this tale.

Was it a joke? Or some kind of mistake? I had just *seen* Erys. And he was healthy, and laughing, and unbelievably irritating!

But all I saw now were more grim faces. No. It couldn't be true.

How could it be true?

My arms flailed. I wanted to run, to strike something with my fist or blade, but I stumbled instead. Jonas caught me, holding me until I could finally form the one-word question I wanted. "How?"

Jonas looked back at me, a deep sorrow in his brown eyes. The veins in his neck throbbed, and I saw the stark white of his scar against his olive skin before I understood the reason. Jonas couldn't answer me. He couldn't sign the words and hold me at the same time.

But I didn't want to let him go, pulling him tighter and tighter against me.

A stranger, another guard, had to be the one to tell me of my brother's death instead. "He was thrown off the ship. They think . . . the *Cypari* think we did it."

I shook my head and pushed back Jonas. I had to speak to him because the other guard was not making any sense. This was a mistake. This *had* to be a mistake.

“They think the emperor would kill his own son?” The emperor loved his son. After Erys’s mother died, the emperor never remarried and swore he would never have another heir besides him. The emperor said he would rather let his generals and the senators fight each other for the title.

Jonas nodded his fist, but he was scowling. “The Cypari are wrong,” he signed. “They could have done it themselves. They are the ones who still live.” Then he reached for me again, looking to the surrounding shadows like he expected an attack. “Ari, you have to go home. There could be war.”

Erys and Helene had married to secure the alliance between Solis and Cypari. There wasn’t supposed to be any more threat of war. And now there was again.

But I was still a terrible princess because I didn’t care about the war. I never did.

Erys was the one who cared, the one with all the plans. The one who married a stranger, adopted a siren’s daughter, and recruited a mute ditch digger into the guard—getting Jonas to train the others to sign and fight sirens with beeswax in their ears. I didn’t stop my mother and Naman because I cared about Solis or Cypari. I did it because I wanted to save Erys and my own soul. Now, everything I had worked so hard for, the deaths I had tried to prevent, could be completely unraveled, and all I wanted was my brother back.

But I had been the one who let him leave in the first place.

If the guards were right, if this wasn’t a cruel mistake or a crueler jest, and if my brother was dead, truly and completely gone, then there was only one person to blame.

My eyes burned with the first hint of real tears. “This . . . this is my fault.”

Jonas shook his fist a bit too venomously. Defensively. “No, you are here. You not have anything to do with that storm.”

“Storm?” I asked, reshaping the three rounded parts of a cloud to make the same sign with my eyebrows raised. “He was thrown off the ship in a storm?” No one had mentioned a storm before. Maybe deliberately. They wouldn’t want to tell me how personal the accusations had been, but I already knew what the Cypari thought of me and my gifts. If there was a storm, they would have no reason to blame Solis or the emperor.

They would blame me.

“Of course I didn’t cause the storm,” I said, the injustice of the thought giving me a bit more strength and focus. “I just meant that Erys wanted me to go with him, and I . . .” My throat dried up again. How could I have refused him?

“And you think you could have saved him?” Jonas asked.

“Maybe. I saved him before. But the Cypari think I summoned the storm?”

“They are wrong,” he signed again.

“Well, someone summoned it.” My disbelief, my sorrow had already faded to a raw anger. The single death of the prince couldn’t be a coincidence. “Naman,” I said, snarling the word. “I saw him at the palace, but I didn’t say.”

“Naman is dead. I saw the body.” Jonas had a special interest in Naman’s death since the man had been the one to raid his childhood farm and give him his scar in a failed murder attempt.

“That’s *why* I didn’t say. He’s supposed to be dead, but he swore himself to Valadern. Maybe that helped him survive somehow? And if he did, he still would want to go after Erys, and attacking his ship is definitely something he would do.” It was something anyone sworn to Valadern would do. Valadern was the God of the Deep—the sea and parts of the underworld.

I thought of his shrine and the dark graveyard on our island again before I remembered Serena. My sister had been at my side when the guards had first delivered the news, but she wasn’t there now. She was kneeling in the abbey’s graveyard among the crosses and other relics of death. Our discussion must have sent her on her own dark spiral.

I used to think that something about being a siren made my sisters colder, unable to express or handle human emotions. It seemed I had been right and wrong all at once. Because even though my sister was human, Serena was still so familiar with and defeated by death, she couldn’t even attempt to comfort me through it.

She merely accepted it—in whatever form it took.

There was a lot I could accept, but I would never accept this.

My eyes burned, my tears evaporating before they could form. I reached for the knife tied to my back, refusing to be defeated. I was the Goddess of the Moon and Hunt reborn. If Valadern had taken my brother and my prince, then he would pay for it.

“So, we look for Naman.” Jonas pointed to his eyes and then out toward the streets like we were surrounded by potential suspects. “We . . .”

“Naman doesn’t matter,” I decided, grabbing Jonas’s hands to stop his words.

Everything else might spiral out of control around me, but this one thing was clear: Erys was dead, and nothing we had done or tried to do before would help this time.

“Killing my mother didn’t matter,” I said. “Valadern will find another pawn. He always does. He’s the one I have to find.”

CHAPTER 9

My sister knelt on the ground in the chapel graveyard, under the shadow of a stone cherub. A soft breeze pulled at the folds of her tunic, her blond hair shining in the starlight like another holy icon.

I felt drawn to her, my sandals sinking into the loose dirt as I walked among the graves. Since Jonas had been signing to me, I didn't know how much of our previous conversation my sister would have understood before she had wandered off. I might have to go over the whole tragedy again, but now that my course of action was certain, I could focus on my anger alone.

That helped.

Serena still spoke before I could. "That prince who died . . . he was one of your lovers?"

Any other time, I might have blushed. I might have looked back at Jonas and wondered what he thought. But now I only answered her with a stark numbness. "He's my brother. My friend."

She nodded, but her eyes stayed fixed straight ahead. "He is with Aides now. They all are." She had said Aides, but among the graves and in a catch of the breeze, it sounded like Hades.

I should have realized before how similar the names were. So much of my sister's life circled back to death and more death. But it only made my point stronger.

"Valadern has a lot to answer for," I said. "I want—"

"To go back to Mother's shrine?" Serena asked as though we already shared one mind. She had understood more of the previous conversation than I expected.

“Valadern has a lot to answer for,” I said again, gripping the skirt of my stola tight.

If nothing else, my brother’s murderers would be made to pay for their crime.

“I suppose . . .” she agreed, but without any of my fire. Just simple resignation. “You don’t have to go back to the island, though. Shrines to Valadern can be made at any of the portals to his realm—any beach or graveyard. I thought about summoning him myself, but . . .” She shuddered.

Valadern was such a ruthless and bloody god, I might have asked why my sister would have even considered calling to him before now, but it seemed we had more pressing concerns.

“You know how?” I had only seen Mother summon Valadern before. And it was at her shrine, a place where the connection had already been so well-established all she seemed to do was call his name. I wasn’t sure how one would go about building a connection out of nothing.

Serena blinked, like the answer should have been obvious. “Of course I know how. I just need an altar.”

That one pierced me like a blade of ice. I knew of only one altar around here.

I looked back at the church and hoped Sister Leah wouldn’t mind too terribly much.

Jonas stood in the chapel doorway behind us. I told him he was “keeping watch” because giving that boy a job was the only way to make him happy sometimes, but the only thing he was watching was the pair of us. He was sure to start signing out his protests again in no time.

I ignored his breathy noises and turned my back. It wasn’t something I did often, but my sister had been right. Sometimes, there were advantages to having a man who could not talk.

I lit the candles around the altar. Serena slid the knife over her fingers. She sprinkled the small red drops on the stone, and the blade glowed ghostly blue in reaction to her royal blood. Many of the old gods desired honeyed wine and specific animal sacrifices but not Valadern.

He craved human blood.

Becoming one of his sirens required a human heart, and any other favor took blood.

Serena looked upward, calling out the rest of the ritual. “I summon Neptune, Poseidon, God of the Sea. King of the Depths, Valadern, I call to thee.”

As she said the words, part of me worried that it wouldn’t work. I worried the church was somehow an impeachable place for such an evil presence to enter.

Then another part of me was completely disappointed when the stink of saltwater and rotten fish touched my nostrils, and his presence slithered in anyway.

Daughter, a voice answered that seemed almost a thought or a passing breeze.

I scanned the empty benches and rows of candles. Just like I had done before in Mother’s shrine, I looked for something to mark Valadern’s physical presence. He didn’t show his body in the mortal realm, but it always seemed there should be something—a puff of smoke or shadow that would tell me where to look. There never was. The only thing I saw was Jonas’s white face as he moved his spear and searched for the voice as well.

So I stood in front of Serena, facing the altar. “She is not your daughter. Not anymore.”

She summoned me. She is marked by me. The words became softer, taking a more soothing tone. *Serena, I know it was not your choice to leave me. Do you wish to return? I can make the pain of this world fade away.*

I didn’t waste a moment to see if Serena was tempted by that dark promise.

“She doesn’t wish to talk to you. She summoned you for me.” And I would be the one to face any consequence of that action.

The candlelight flickered as the voice laughed around me. *You? What business would I have with you?*

“You killed my brother.”

I kill no one. I only collect the souls that are sent my way.

“And you sent Naman to take my brother’s soul.”

He didn’t deny it. *So, you wish to ask for its return?*

I gaped. I hadn’t expected that. I was on the hunt for revenge, not redemption. “You . . . you can do that?”

I am a god. I can do what I want. But I'm not sure why I should. You have nothing to threaten me with, child.

"Perhaps not." I couldn't fight or kill something I couldn't even see. "But I could make a bargain. You like bargains?" He had bargained with me before, anyway. I had traded my voice for a chance to see Solis and win the prince's heart.

I do, Valadern agreed, *but there is no trust between us. If there is to be any bargain, then I will set the terms.*

Of course he would. I would be voiceless again at best.

I gritted my teeth, my hands fisted as I waited for the rest of my sentence to be pronounced.

You may enter my realm, and you may search for the soul. If you locate it and carry it out, you may keep it. If not, you will swear to me and become a part of my collection forever.

I felt a sharp, warning tug on my arm, but I didn't look to see if it was Jonas or Serena.

I was already shaking my head. "I won't kill anyone."

The one you were meant to kill is in my realm; the heart you were meant to take is already mine. If you cannot reclaim his life, then you will merely be required to finish your oath with his blood. None can pass through my realm without such a bargain.

"Your realm." I glanced down at my toes. "The underworld?"

Is that a problem?

"No." My shoulders straightened. I wouldn't kill anyone, but my brother was already dead. I could risk my own soul for a chance to save his. "But if I do reclaim Erys's soul, I want that to be the end of it. You will not come after my family ever again."

He didn't answer me, but I didn't need him to. Whether he agreed or not, I had determined that whatever time I spent in the underworld would be dedicated to not only finding my brother's soul but finding the key to this dark god's destruction.

There would be no peace for any of us until that was done.

The lights flickered again, and Valadern's voice became more distant. A hasty retreat. *Say your goodbyes, child. I will only open the portal once.*

There should have been nothing to mark Valadern's exit, like there had been nothing to mark his entrance, but a candlestick fell to the ground. The

small fire snuffed itself out as it hit the stone. Instead of Valadern, I turned and found Jonas behind me.

Jonas had knocked the candlestick down after tugging on my arm hadn’t worked. Who knew how long he had been trying to get my attention?

He pointed as the door opened, moving the air around us.

I took my knife back from Serena. Someone else was here.

CHAPTER 10

Sister Leah was framed in the doorway. She held a small candle. The wrinkles around her frown and her hooded face made her seem harsher than ever. “What were you doing there?”

I blanched and tried to keep the bloody knife behind my back. Leah would not like me summoning a pagan god into the church. Or summoning a pagan god at all. But it was a highly unusual circumstance, and what could I tell her instead?

In the end, I just sank into one of the benches and told her the exact truth.

Leah still looked cross, dismissing the others from the chapel so she could focus her ire on me alone. Perhaps I was the one she was most ashamed of. The one she trusted to know better.

And normally, I would have known better, but a prince’s death wasn’t a usual occurrence.

“I’m sorry. You know I wouldn’t have done it except . . . we need Erys to stop the war. This is the only way.” I still didn’t know if I cared about the war, but it was the best way to defend my actions. Saving my brother’s life could save countless others.

She shook her head. “Even if that were true, how do you know he has the prince’s soul to give?”

“He’s a god. He can take souls.” That should be obvious.

“I don’t believe that.”

I sighed. Though the nuns sometimes allowed revised stories and festivals to the old gods, calling them saints to appease the superstitious, they only believed in one god. And I certainly believed their ideas about

gods were more pleasant than mine. I just hadn't seen them be very effective.

But there wasn't any point in saying that to someone so devout.

I tried a different line of reasoning. "Yes, but if someone believed in Valadern, and they swore to him, wouldn't it make sense for him to keep their souls?"

She paused, but then her jaw became hard and stubborn again. "Perhaps an unrepentant soul could be claimed by a devil. But I don't believe someone could swear another soul to that fate. Only their own."

"When my sisters were sirens, they stole souls all the time." Or at least I saw them drain blood—and something more than blood—from the victims they claimed. If Naman or another of Valadern's followers had come after Erys, they could have done the same.

Erys wouldn't willingly swear his soul away, but I doubted Valadern and his dark minions would work so hard to possess it if they didn't know they could take it.

Leah shook her head again, grasping the rosary cross at her neck. "He can have no power. I know what I was promised."

I wished I had that kind of faith. But the only thing I was certain of was that if there were any loophole, Valadern would have found it. "I still have to go," I said. "I'm sorry."

She didn't fight me after that, and I kept myself firm until she went outside.

Then I collapsed.

Away from all the others, in that cold and empty chapel, the tears I had been holding back rushed out all at once. My voice went hoarse, my hands soaked and tangled in long strands of my dark hair. Really, I hated my plan. I hated I had to make a plan at all. Planning was supposed to be Erys's job, but now that he wasn't here to fulfill his role, what was I to do instead?

I just couldn't give up on him. Alone, I would hunt in the darkness, and once Erys was back, once my moon had its sun again, then everything would be as it should be.

The rest of the night became a dark blur. I knew Jonas helped me from the church to the small room where my sister was already sleeping. And when dawn came, Sister Leah called for me again. I stayed on my cot and kept my back to her, bracing myself for another lecture, but it never came. “I wish to show you something,” she said instead.

Dirt caked my face, dried on from last night’s tears. I didn’t bother to change or attend to my hair, but I splashed some water in my face and followed after her, still in a daze, until I saw Corva standing in the outer hall.

I blinked at first, unable to believe it. Then I ran to her. “You came?”

Corva nodded, but she turned her head so her dark curls hid most of her face. “I just wanted . . . I hoped . . . Do you think I could stay here for a while?” She pulled at the edges of her tunic.

“Really?” That quickly? I didn’t think I had done anything that convincing. I had wanted to keep trying, but all my plans to help them seemed as useless as anything else. Even the desperate deal I made with Valadern had been cut short, leaving me unsure of when or where his dark portal would appear and what my next step should be. “What made you change your mind?”

“It might not be changed very much,” she admitted. “It’s just, I’ve been ill the last few days . . .”

I nodded. She had been pale and swaying a bit last night. I thought she had been drunk.

But maybe she hadn’t been.

She still was trembling. “Nothing too serious I thought, but then . . . then I *knew* and . . . and the nuns take unwed mothers? I heard that.”

“Mothers?” I paused, needing several moments for the word to settle inside my head. “Corva, are you . . . ?” I looked at her belly. It wasn’t any wider than it was the day before, but Corva was already nodding. “You’re pregnant,” I said.

“Yes, and with my luck it’s the son of that man you met before.” She scowled and pulled at her hair. “I hate it. It ruined everything.”

I waited, unsure how to stop her from yelling at her own pregnant belly.

“I was doing well, but Gia’s right. It puts men off, and I won’t make enough to keep my room. And even when it’s born, it’ll be useless. More useless if it is a boy. That’s what Gia said. The boys are useless. But she

knew some things I could try. Some herbs to make me bleed it out or just one good punch to the stomach. She told me what I could do, as a favor."

My heart dropped, thinking of our island graveyard and the endless rivers of blood. I had wanted so much to have saved my sisters from that life, but I hadn't. I couldn't. I might drag them physically anywhere I wanted, but I couldn't change the demons they carried with them. Maybe nothing could.

I didn't want to believe that, but my words were a child's plea, even in my own ears. "You didn't. Please say you didn't."

"Working girls do it all the time," Corva said, her words becoming a hollow chant. "It makes sense, you know? And I just know it will be a boy." She hugged her arms around her waist, sinking to the floor and rocking a bit as she continued. "I remember—Or maybe I just remember Mother telling me about it later, how silly I had been. I had only seen a few summers, but Mother was pregnant, and I was so excited. I wanted to hold him and count all his toes like she said I could. But then . . . she wouldn't let me. He was a boy, and she said he was useless. The boys are useless. And then he was gone."

Our brother. The one who should be the same age as Erys but was sacrificed the day he was birthed. Corva was the older of the twins, but I had no idea she would actually remember that. All I had were the stories, and those haunted me enough. It was a ragged, gnawing hole in my soul I never understood until Erys came to help fill it.

"She let me hold you the next year, when you were born, but I still . . . I wanted . . ." Corva shook her head, unable to continue. "I thought we were doing all right. We were making money, and we weren't hurting anyone. But if I still have to kill my baby like Mother did . . . I didn't care if our brother was useless. I still wanted to hold him."

I wanted to hold her too, so much. But I still wasn't sure if she would let me.

I decided to try anyway. Let her stab me if she liked.

As I knelt down, and my arms came around her, she went as still as a stone pillar. Her voice was softer, like a younger girl. "I didn't do anything. I couldn't. I just thought . . . if I have my baby here, the nuns can adopt him out. I know I'm not any kind of mother. I just want to hold him. Just one time before he goes."

I felt a flutter inside me then, like another small breath, another small heartbeat. The baby was still alive, still growing inside her. And with that life came hope.

That baby would live a better life than the one we grew up with. We all would.

“You don’t have to decide right now,” I said, clasping our hands together. “Girl, boy, this baby is going to live, and you are going to be a wonderful mother. I just know it. And I would help you. I would so love to be an aunt; you know I would.”

Corva didn’t answer, tears brimming from her eyes.

I wouldn’t press her. She had been through enough today. “Go get Catra. You can both stay here until the baby comes.” Longer if I had any say in it.

If I was going to the underworld, I didn’t need any more of Erys’s money, and I would spend it all to make sure my sisters were in the place where I felt they might be the safest.

After Corva left to get her twin, I didn’t want to stand or look up. Even though Sister Leah had stayed in the shadows and down the hall, it was like I could *feel* her smiling at me.

“You see?” she asked.

“See what?”

“You made a difference after all.”

I turned. “I didn’t make Corva pregnant.”

“Yes, but she knew she had a place to come to, and that helped save a soul. Hers and her child’s. Our god is different from yours, but we are no less powerful when we follow His ways.”

I shook my head. “This doesn’t mean you’re right.” Maybe kindness alone could help the twins, but that didn’t change anything else. I doubted the nuns’ god knew a thing about raising people from the dead. And even if He could, a saintly god wouldn’t care to do business with me and my sisters. I could just see Him lifting His nose like Helene’s mother. But Leah wasn’t like that. “You will still watch them? Even if I . . . go against your wishes?”

“I’m not against you, Ari. I know you have many conflicting thoughts and desires. I simply want to be able to help you through them as I can.” She came closer, smoothing my hair and pressing her rosary into my hands.

“I want you to believe. Keep faith. If that was a true devil, it can only go where it is invited and have the power you give it.”

“Serena!” I called. I strode through the halls of the monastery. I wanted to tell her what had happened to the twins, and that they would be joining us soon. I left the dorms and entered the chapel.

Then I coughed on a cloud of smoke.

Even before the air cleared and I saw Serena kneeling by the bloody altar, I knew what she had done. I scowled. “Quit summoning demons into the church. The nuns don’t like it.”

Serena stayed facing the altar. “I had to,” she said.

“You had to? Why?” We were already in enough trouble. Nothing seemed worth calling in more of it.

“To make my own bargain.”

“Bargain? What kind of bargain?”

“The same one you did.”

My blood went cold, and my heart sunk somewhere below the ground. “For Aides? You risked your soul to resurrect Aides?”

She nodded. “Yes, and now I can help you too. We can go to the underworld together.” She turned; her eyes bright. Sparkling. Smiling in an innocent, hopeful way that I hadn’t seen from her in years.

Had I ever seen it?

I released a great puff of air. I still wanted to be angry at her, but I was more angry at myself. I should have thought of Aides and perhaps a hundred other victims all claimed by Valadern and my mother’s hand. My father. My infant brothers. But really, those men were strangers to me. Part of me ached for the missed opportunity, and that I wouldn’t even recognize their faces if I saw them, but that was the truth.

I needed Erys. He was the only soul I had been promised.

That so much depended on his soul, his life, really was the height of irony. He already was insufferable. I missed his cocky smile so much.

I had planned to make this hunt on my own, but I wasn’t Artemis in truth. I wasn’t alone. Even with the twins coming to the monastery, I still

had one sister left to save. Serena should have a chance to rescue the soul of her love and achieve whatever redemption that act could offer her.

“All right, Serena.” I reached down to grab her hand, covering all the new cuts and old scars. “We’ll go and save them both.”

CHAPTER 11

According to Serena's conversation with Valadern, the gate to the underworld would open tonight. We didn't tell Sister Leah. I had to get ready, but I paced the small room more than I packed. What did one take on a journey like this? I looked at Serena. "What do you know about the underworld?" Mother had instructed all of us in the ways of the old gods, but Serena had always been a better student than I was.

She shook her head, like she wasn't quite sure herself. "I know it's supposed to be guarded by a three-headed dog named Cerberus."

"Cerberus?" I asked, surprised, but I wasn't worried about dogs. The Cerberus I knew was hardly a threat. "Anything else?"

"You're not supposed to eat anything. If you do, you will become bonded there and never be able to leave."

That one made me pause, my hand on the waterskin. "Does that just apply to food found in the underworld? Could we carry some with us? What about water?"

Serena shook her head again. She didn't know. And I doubted Valadern would sit around to clarify. He was a god. He had to follow the terms of his own bargain, but he would still use any trick he had to impede us.

Sighing heavily, I emptied my pack of food and drained my waterskin just to be safe.

I had thought myself lucky Valadern hadn't imposed a timeline on our quest, but if we couldn't eat or drink, then we couldn't stay down there very long at all. "So that gives us, what? Maybe three days?" To search the whole underworld for two souls.

I should have cursed myself for making this bargain, but I already knew any deal I made with Valadern would be slanted in his favor. We would just have to make the best of it.

At least our tight schedule meant I could pack light. We would either be out of there quickly, or we would never leave.

I quickly gathered some rope and a few linen blankets to carry in a small pack I could sling over my shoulder. Then, simply because I could not imagine leaving such a gift behind, I put on Sister Leah's rosary cross. I admired the polished silver's twisted engravings and even had some respect for what it represented, but I didn't expect it to protect me. My dagger was already belted to my stola for that. Once I had everything settled, I walked outside to the graveyard where the others were waiting to see us off.

Jonas was pouting again, thick eyebrows slanted down. He put his spear in his armpit so he could sign the same words he had chased me with since we first summoned Valadern. "I should go with you."

"You can't. Valadern won't let you." At least, not without another soul to sacrifice. Jonas wasn't violent enough to consider such a thing, but I still wouldn't risk saying the words out loud. We all had grown a little desperate.

"Valadern? Ari, that god is evil. He not make good deals, and you can't go down there alone."

"I won't. I'm bringing Serena." I signed her name, but he still wasn't appeased.

"That not make it better!" He made his signs wide, his eyes pleading. "I not like this. Prince would not like this. He wanted me to keep you safe."

No one knew what Erys liked or wanted anymore. He was dead, and I was going to fix it.

But it seemed I would have to find another job to occupy Jonas in the meantime.

"You can keep my sisters safe." I pointed to the twins. Valadern might not hold them in the same contempt, but he might still come for them. They were once his.

The twins circled closer as if my words had summoned them. Catra tilted her hips, looking over Jonas's shoulders and broad frame. "He's cute," she said. "Is it true that he doesn't talk at all?"

I winced. "Yes, but he can hear you. He isn't deaf."

The twins just giggled together. They didn't care that he had heard her.

Jonas didn’t look at them. He circled his hand on his chest in earnest. “Please don’t leave me with them. Don’t leave at all. Ari . . .” He stopped signing, but the words were still there for anyone to see. He begged with his eyes, the same way he had before.

Stay. Please stay.

He wanted me to stop running, to be by his side in his bright world forever.

He looked so earnest and vulnerable I might have relented, lost to the same spell that had gripped me when we had stumbled into this graveyard mere days before, but I couldn’t. Everything else in my life was still in chaos—even more than before. I had a sister to help and a brother to save before I could hope for anything better.

I couldn’t stay or have Jonas following me. Not this time.

It really wasn’t fair that I was a princess, and he was a guard and had to do what I said, even when he so clearly did not want to. We would have to do something to change that. Perhaps Erys could after I found him. After Erys returned, I surely wouldn’t need something so important that Jonas and I couldn’t find some better compromise.

Then, my sisters and brother would be redeemed, and we could come together, hands clasped, and finally find an answer to that lurking question between us. The darkness of my past would fade into our bright future.

For now, I took comfort in knowing that if I ordered it, Jonas would do it, and he and the rest of my family would be as safe as they could be.

“You’ll be fine,” I said. “They’re with the nuns now.” Sister Leah was sure to get the twins straightened up soon enough. At least I hoped so. I had enough to deal with already without worrying about them. I turned to Serena. “Now what?”

“We wait?” she guessed.

I had no better idea, so we waited. And waited.

The moon shone through a thin shroud of clouds. Shadows shifted around the gravestones. The boarhound slept. The twins got bored and left. Jonas signed more misgivings until I made him leave too. Then I cried out my own frustration, and lightning streaked the sky.

I wasn’t expecting anything else to come of my outburst, but my eyes were drawn to the massive boarhound. He perked up. Usually, he only had one head, but in the flash of light, I thought I saw two more.

I smiled. He had always been this graveyard’s guardian.

I called to the dog. “Cerberus? Can you show me the way, a path to the underworld?”

He wagged his tail and darted around a gravestone, his nose down to the ground.

His noses.

Giving Serena another quick smile, I held on to my skirt and bounded after him. My feet sank lower after a few steps, descending down a stone path that couldn’t have been there before.

We were on our way.

CHAPTER 12

As we tunneled down the spiral path of misshapen earth and stone leading to the underworld, the roar of water running downstream filled my ears constantly. It echoed through the stone, like one of the city aqueducts. At first, the constant sound was all I could hear, but then my ears adjusted, learning to filter it out as background noise.

Then I could whisper to Serena again and hear her footsteps on the earth beside me.

My eyes took longer to adjust. We had left the stars and moon far behind. The few soft lights were so distant I couldn't be sure of the source. My foot slipped. *Splashed.* Water had dripped down one wall and pooled onto a step. Before I found the wall and righted myself, I crunched a dried femur. The shards dug past my sandal sole to scratch at my toes.

I cursed all the gods I knew. Goddesses too. The leather strap hung on by a thread, and I did not want to walk through the underworld barefoot.

Bad enough that we had to come here at all.

"Ari? Are you all right?" Serena called from behind me.

"Yes, but . . ." I looked up from my sandal and blinked. Cerberus wasn't in front of us anymore. I couldn't even say for certain how long ago he had left us. It seemed he had slipped into the shadows and never reemerged. "Where is he?"

Serena shook her head. But I didn't curse the gods for that one. I trusted the dog would find his own way home, and we didn't need him as a guide anymore. Everyone knew the direction to the underworld. Down. Other tunnels intersected with ours at various points, but they all converged into one central, downward climb. And just like the caverns on our old island,

this one was littered with dry bones—buried in the walls and strewn about the earthen stairway.

I wondered, if I had ventured past Mother's shrine and those full skeletons before, if I would have found myself in the underworld years ago.

The musty cold and damp seeped deep into my veins at the thought. The sooner we found Erys and returned home, the better.

We followed the rough staircase, tunneling down and down and down some more until the rushing water broke out in front of us. Waves hit the rocks, churning up foam and flowing into a dark river that blocked the way. I couldn't even see the other bank across the water.

I fell back against the wall, exhausted in the face of this new challenge.

But while I only needed a break to catch my breath and adjust the sandal that had been pierced by the bone shards, Serena's voice wavered like we had already been completely defeated. "How are we supposed to get past that?" she asked. "Neither of us are sirens."

"Humans can still swim. Or ride on boats." I had become a bit of an expert in making rafts, but I wasn't seeing a lot to work with. No trees or dead wood. No abandoned shipwrecks. Just dirt and rocks and bones and darkness.

"Yes. And then they drown," Serena said bitterly.

With a rush, I thought of my brother and former rafting companion drowning without me, thrown off a ship bound for Cypari. I held onto a spiked stalagmite and still almost slipped.

My already pale sister blanched in the dim light. "I'm sorry, Ari. I didn't mean it like that. We'll get him out. I promise."

It wasn't her fault. It was mine. "I should have gone with Erys to Cypari. I just . . . I didn't think I could deal with Helene's parents." My excuses seemed so silly and petty now.

"Why not?"

"They said . . . Well, they think I will be just like Mother. That I already am."

Serena shook her head. "What they said didn't bother you that much, did it?"

"It shouldn't have. I just worry . . ." The knot of anxiety surfaced again, choking the words from my throat. The fear seemed inescapable, no matter how far I had gone to avoid it.

And Serena already seemed to know. While Erys was my perfect opposite and the sun to my moon, Serena might share my soul. “You think it’s true?” she asked.

I didn’t see how it couldn’t be. I had seen how much Erys acted like his father and Helene favored her mother. I never met either of Jonas’s parents, but chances were, I would see him or Janessa in their mother’s face. Maybe I was destined to become like my mother. I still heard her last words in my head sometimes, telling me I would forever be a princess of the deep.

And here I was, making deals with her dark god and entering his realm.

I reached for the rosary at my neck, asking for forgiveness and for some inspiration to help me combat the consequences of my own foolishness, but if anything, the water raged fiercer around me when I held the cool metal close.

“Your friends are lucky,” Serena said, as though she could banish the curse of my words. “They were raised by ones they wished to emulate, and it comes more naturally. Others must choose outside of their families to pick their models, but I think they still can choose this.” She touched my hand that was still clasped around the cross. “You can be more like your Sister Leah and the rest of the nuns if you wish to.”

I hoped so. Either way, I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. I put the cross away and knelt on the rocks, reaching into the river. I tested the temperature and speed of the water.

Too cold and much too fast.

Then something slipped past my hand—something moving, maybe alive . . . ?

I jerked back before it could grab or bite me. I didn’t know what would live in the waters of the underworld, but there was no way I would risk swimming with an unknown creature lurking just under the surface.

I rocked back on my knees. “How are we going to get across?” I asked, joining Serena in a near surrender.

“You could ask me,” a low voice said.

We both jumped. My thoughts scattered. I tried reaching for the rosary and the dagger at the same time, only managing to flail my hand between them.

A tall, lanky young man had appeared next to us on the bank of the river. He wore a dark cloak over a simple tunic and had a pale but plain face

that could be easily overlooked in a crowd, but I had no idea how he had appeared beside us without our notice.

I shook my head. He wasn't quite the monster I had initially feared we might find in the underworld, but he still was an unwelcome mystery. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

He laughed. "I'm always here."

"You're a spirit?" That might be the only way to explain his sudden appearance. Would spirits be appearing everywhere now that we were in the underworld?

"More of a guide. I don't have a human soul. Never did."

I stood and pulled back on Serena's arm. We couldn't get far without hitting the wall of the tunnel, but I wanted to talk to her with as much privacy as possible. I did not trust this man.

"He's one of Valadern's minions," I said. "Like Lilthe." She was an imp who was supposed to help me in the human world, but she really just served to hamper my way and report back to Valadern and my mother.

"Yes," Serena agreed, "but what else are we supposed to do? Neither of us knows anything about this place."

I opened my mouth again, but I had no more words to fill it with. There was nothing I could say to argue with that. I had already exhausted all my ideas before the man had appeared.

Serena gave a hesitant smile, stepping forward to speak to him. "You want to help us?"

The hooded man slunk back from her. He seemed a shadow, fleeing the light. "More like, I've been ordered to help you. I help everyone. I'm the ferryman." He gestured to a long boat that couldn't have been there before. An oil lamp hung over the bow, showing a carving of a woman's face like a siren. But that was where the familiarity ended.

The man became exasperated with our blank expressions.

"It's in all the legends," he said. "Believers bury their dead with a coin to pay the ferryman; he escorts the soul across the river Styx into the underworld. Haven't you heard?"

I hadn't heard, but it didn't matter. Only one thing did. "You'll get us across the river."

"You have a coin?"

I reached my hand into my sack, then frowned. I had grown used to having money, but I had given it all to the twins before coming here. I

didn’t think I would need it in the underworld. What would an immortal spirit living alone below the surface want with money anyway? I certainly hadn’t needed any coins alone on my mother’s island.

But before I could voice any of this, Serena put her hands into her bag and produced two coins for the pair of us. “What?” she asked in response to my surprise. “I *was* working.”

I supposed. Just because I didn’t care to think of my sister’s profession didn’t mean her money was worth less than mine.

The ferryman tested the coins and looked at us, more skeptically. “You are Arianna and Serena, correct? Miranda’s daughters.”

That stopped me in my place. “You know?” How could he know?

He shrugged and pocketed the coin. “Well, we don’t often get living people down here. I ferry the dead. But I have been told to let you across.”

I knew it. “You see?” I hissed back at Serena. “He *is* working for Valadern.”

The ferryman shook his head, no longer pretending he couldn’t hear our whispered words. “He told me to let you across. That’s all.” He gestured to his ship and the roaring river again. “So, are you going to accept my help, or do either of you have a better idea?”

CHAPTER 13

We didn't have any better ideas. We boarded the ferryman's boat. He started us across, digging into the water with an oar as long and thin as a pike. Despite the wind moaning and the water raging around us, he set out at a pace so slow I became impatient.

We needed to get to Erys now.

"Can't you go faster?" I asked.

The ferryman shook his head without glancing at me. His cloak covered his face and swept behind him like a dark sail. "Look at the water."

At first, I thought he was only going to point to the rocks and say I should be grateful he hadn't broken the ship against them, then I saw more of the shapes under the surface.

The ferryman wasn't just using the oar to draw us forward, but to shepherd the creatures away from the ship so we could pass. Creatures with long legs and smooth skin, a few still wearing rags around their most intimate areas as they swam. A soft glow radiated from their pale skin, and they stared out under the foam and waves with hollow, pupil-less eyes.

"Those are people? Dead people? Don't they need to breathe?" That was a stupid question. We were in the underworld—of course no one needed to breathe except Serena and me. But still, why would anything that had been human choose to live that way? "Even if they don't breathe, wouldn't they prefer to be on land?"

The ferryman's face went grim, and he rested his oar for a moment. "If they had a better sense of themselves and their surroundings, they might prefer land. But these souls are old and . . . forgetful."

“They don’t know who they are? Or who they were?” That seemed a terrible fate. And while I knew there were plenty of horrors waiting in the underworld, I had hoped they only applied to those who committed a crime punishable by the gods. Evil men and women who deserved terrible fates. “But there are so many of them.”

“Yes,” the ferryman agreed. “The river didn’t use to be this large. It flooded the lower banks when Poseidon became Valadern and usurped more of the underworld. The waters of Styx merged with the waters of Lethe, Acheron, and Cocytus—the rivers of forgetfulness, lamentation, and sorrow are all diluted and mixed together. The older souls were swept away and are now trapped among the waves.”

Trapped among the waves. I shuddered at the thought. It was the same one that had haunted my dreams every night on my mother’s island—that I would one day become a siren and be trapped in the damp and chill of Valadern’s realm forever. It seemed that was what the underworld had become. Many of the old gods had powers that brushed against each other. Even overlap. I hadn’t thought of Valadern aggressively taking over the underworld, but it made sense.

Valadern was nothing but aggressive and bloody.

And if he now ruled the underworld completely, then I didn’t expect anyone’s stay here to be pleasant. Mine certainly wouldn’t be. Not with how I had spurned Valadern in the past. Yet another reason to avoid death as long as possible. And to help my friends and family do the same.

I couldn’t complain about our speed after that, but if this part was going to take hours, we needed to figure out more of our plan. We needed to actually have a plan.

I turned to Serena. “Can you tell me about Hades?” My pale sister was still wilting in silence over the plight of the spirits below us, and it seemed the change in subject should be a welcome one.

The ferryman started and looked at me before I realized my mistake. I hadn’t wanted to invoke the attention of another death god—even one who had his power usurped.

One dark god cursing us was more than enough.

“I mean Aides,” I said. “Can you tell me about him? Where was he from?”

Serena paused, and her eyes darted away from me. “I don’t know.”

“You didn’t ask him?” That couldn’t be right. They were in love. When I thought I was in love with Erys, I was eager to learn everything there was to know about him.

I knew a lot about Jonas now too, but I was more cautious.

But if Aides was Serena’s first and only love, there should have been no caution.

“I did ask,” Serena said. “But he never told me. He said he couldn’t remember. I assumed he hit his head when he fell from his ship.”

“Did you see his ship?” Perhaps there was some detail there that could at least tell us his country of origin—a crest or a flag I might recognize from among the foreign dignitaries I had seen visit the emperor at the seaside palace.

“No, but he must have had one. We lived on an island; men don’t just appear out of thin air.” She was becoming defensive. I wasn’t trying to make her feel any worse than she already did.

“It’s all right. I just thought if the souls are organized in some way, maybe knowing where he came from would help us find him.” My eyes had adjusted to the darkness enough to see the faces of my two traveling companions, but I couldn’t see the walls of the underground tunnel anymore. Everything had opened up to a vast expanse of emptiness.

We needed some way to organize our search, or it would be endless.

“Would they be arranged by how new they were?” Serena asked. “How recently they died?”

That might make even more sense than location. “How do you tell a new soul from an old soul?”

“You could ask me.”

The ferryman’s sudden words startled me just as much as when he had first appeared. And I would have preferred he stayed mute. Anything he said had to be another trap.

I shook my head. “You’re working for Valadern.”

“He told me to get you across. That’s all. He didn’t tell me to help you after that, but he didn’t tell me not to either. That means I have the great luxury of choosing for myself.” There was a dramatic lilt to the words, like he really thought that choice a luxury.

“Will you help us?” Serena put her hands together like a prayer, seeming far too eager.

But he was a soulless demon, like all Valadern's minions. We shouldn't spend any more time or conversation with him than was strictly necessary.

When had I become the more responsible sibling? I didn't care for it at all.

"I'm considering it," he said with a shrug. He looked back at the water, and it seemed Serena's attention embarrassed him as much as it did me. "These boys you are looking for, they are your true loves?"

What did that even mean outside of stories? I supposed I used to believe them, when I only had pictures in a storybook to tell me about the world outside my island. But my first brush with love left me more cynical. I knew all about unrequited love and all the shades and stages of affection that made such an ideal so elusive—maybe completely unattainable.

"I love Erys," I said. "He is like my brother. Does that count?"

"Perhaps," the ferryman said. "If the connection is strong, and he feels the same way about you."

"Erys loves me." That much I could be certain of.

"Splendid." The ferryman's dry tone didn't fit the word, and then he jerked his oar toward Serena. "And you?"

I answered "yes" at the same time Serena said "no."

We both looked at each other before I decided to let Serena tell her own story. "I love Aides," she said, "but he won't love me anymore. I killed him."

The slap of the oar and the sound of the water filled the awkward space those words seemed to require. They might have been true, but they didn't tell the whole story. I wished Serena would have explained more, and I almost opened my mouth to defend her myself, but the moment was gone too soon.

The ferryman gave the slightest of nods, staring out impassively. "Yes. That could be a problem. You see, you're not the first to come here seeking a lost soul. Those who succeeded were able to locate the one they lost by the bond they shared. Their love is like a . . . tether. A beacon of energy drawing them together. Without that sort of shared bond, you will get lost. There really isn't any order down here anymore."

"So, the new souls and old souls just wander around together?" I asked.

"Yes, but you were right about one thing; a new soul would be easier to find. They still have some memories of their former lives. The old ones

forget. Less likely to be able to create the kind of mutual bond you would need to draw yourselves together.”

I didn’t answer. I was too busy looking at the approaching shoreline. There were thousands of old souls in the water. There would be millions more on the shore. Even with a bond, this would take forever if it could be done at all.

And as I started to think of Erys, a withered hand burst through the bottom of the ship with a sharp *crack.*

CHAPTER 14

Wood shards and a rush of water hit my face, filling my mouth with blood and salt. I screamed but more from the surprise. After sitting restlessly in the boat for so long, I was ready for some direct challenge, something to fight. I pulled for my dagger. One stab to the skeletal wrist and the reaching hand retreated back into the depths of the river Styx. That only solved half our problem. Water, green and mucus thick, seeped in through the gap the hand left behind.

We were going to drown. *Slowly.* The gelatinous water wasn't fast, but it still needed to be stopped. I scanned the ship for something to plug the hole.

"Help me," I cried, calling to my traveling companions.

Serena jerked back, horrified. Paler than she normally was. But not because of the hand.

Because of me.

"Why did you do that?" she asked, the words a direct affront.

"It was attacking the ship!"

"It's a lost soul. It must be so confused. So desperate. It wanted help."

How could she tell what it wanted? It was just a hand—one that would have pulled us into the river with it. What could she be thinking? Didn't she care about our lives and the lives of the ones we came to save? "It isn't Erys or Aides. We can't fix them all."

She shook, more violently. "I can't be the cause of another death, I can't!"

"I didn't kill it." Even if stabbing the creature in the hand were a mortal wound, it was already dead. Everything here was dead besides us.

“Can you two settle this thing later?” the ferryman asked. “I think you’re making them more upset.”

I opened my mouth to shout at him too. We could drown, but it wasn’t my fault. The soul had attacked before I had done anything, and the ferryman wasn’t helping me fix the problem either.

But then I saw that the reason he hadn’t been helping. He had his hands full, using the oar to balance the boat and fend off other reaching hands.

The whole river was alive with long, grasping fingers.

Perhaps the lingering tension had stirred all the formerly peaceful spirits into action. It certainly hadn’t helped me fulfill my true goal: stopping up the bottom gap that was still leaking in water. So, I let Serena stay pressed against the other end of the boat and grabbed both our packs to plug them into the open hole all on my own.

More water flowed over my hands—putrid water. Dead water.

I shivered in the cold, hating this river and everything in it.

Once the water stopped leaking into the boat, and the other spirits forgot about attacking us, my anger died away, and I could feel a bit more charitable toward my sister. My actions were perfectly justified. We had to protect ourselves before all others. But I was still a huntress. My sister had seen and suffered too much to be the same. I would not apologize, but I could forgive.

It took a longer time before I was willing to look in the river again, but a question plagued my thoughts and leapt from my mouth.

“The hand . . . It wasn’t just a soul. It had a body.” I had thought a soul would be as thin and transparent as a reflection, but it had broken through the wood, and I had stabbed it with my dagger. It hadn’t bled out like a live body, but it was as solid as any corpse.

The ferryman nodded. “There are many loose souls around that float in the water and the air.” He pointed outside the boat as he spoke, and it was only then I realized the distant lights all had the shape of ghostly figures who stirred the wind and filled it with their moaning voices. “But when a body is buried in the old way or sent directly to the gods through the earth or sea, a soul can slip back inside and reanimate it. But it isn’t like being

alive. The corpses continue to wither, and the attachment between the body and soul isn't as strong. It's like . . ." He looked down at my hand still plugging up the boat for his inspiration. "Holding together two pieces of a broken board. There is nothing that can make it fit smoothly again."

"A god could. Valadern could." That promise was the thing that had brought me here.

Thankfully, the ferryman agreed with me.

"Yes. A god could." But he became thoughtful and quiet after that. His tall figure and long cloak made him look more akin to a shadow.

We reached the bank in silence. Once the front bow was wedged into place, I retrieved our bags from the hole and let the back half of the ship fill with more water in their absence.

It was a relief to feel the earth beneath my sandals, even though the cavernous area seemed just as rocky and barren as it had on the other side of the river. I couldn't see very far, but what I did see wasn't at all promising: three large podiums towered over us on a central dais. They looked a bit like the seats the judges used in the Solian senate, but instead of men in tunics, three weathered skeletons lorded over us. Two stared out with empty eye sockets while the last one had lost its head entirely.

"What's this?" I asked, turning back around.

"You don't know?" The ferryman shook his head. He still held the oar, but he used the other hand to coax my sister out of the half-sunken boat. The gesture seemed just as disdainful as helpful. "Honestly, how you thought you were going to navigate this place on your own is a great mystery to me."

I scowled. It wasn't my fault. I had been given no time to plan or become an expert on the underworld, not with how quickly Erys had been snatched away from me. What else could I do but hope I would somehow figure it out on the way? And if he and the rest of the locals didn't want to be helpful, then that was what I would continue to do.

But the ferryman and Serena both stepped forward to join me near the dais, and the ferryman explained. "Spirits who came here were judged by three old heroes and kings and then sent to one of three locations—Elysium, Asphodel, and Tartarus. Elysium's fields are a paradise for the heroes, and Tartarus is a place to punish the evil souls. But most people are neither especially good nor bad and go straight into Asphodel." As he spoke, he

pointed upward for Elysium and down for Tartarus, so I supposed we would just keep walking at this same level to go to Asphodel.

“But how can they judge anyone? They aren’t alive.” I could have accepted another spirit or even a reanimated corpse, but the skeletons looked just like all the bones we had seen on the way here. Dead and motionless as discarded sticks.

The ferryman nodded. “And you met Cerberus. Not exactly the most intimidating guard, now is he?”

No. Cerberus was just a dog until the underworld opened up, and even then, I only saw his true form for a second. I would bet anything he had returned to the priest, content to spend the rest of his days guarding the church graveyard and begging for belly rubs from the young novices.

“This whole place is breaking down,” the ferryman said. “Valadern would never tell you that, but that’s the truth. Fewer people believe, so less of it exists.”

I stepped closer to the skeletons on the dais with a bit more courage. Bones alone might not be very useful, but they also couldn’t hurt me. “So, the souls who come here aren’t judged anymore?”

“The souls usually still find the right place anyway. People are always judging themselves and building their own torments.”

I nodded. The underworld might be in more disarray now, but it might not matter. If the judges had worked under Valadern, Erys wouldn’t be fairly judged anyway. I would have easily called my brother a hero, but Valadern might have called him the opposite. Even if there was some measuring stick of worthiness outside of Valadern, I didn’t know what deeds it valued.

We still wouldn’t have known where to look.

“Well, aren’t you going to try it?” Serena asked, finding her voice again.

I shook my head. “Try what?”

“Feeling for your prince.”

Oh, right. The “soul connection” the ferryman had said would guide us through the underworld. But how was that supposed to work? The whole thing seemed so unlikely—our feelings bringing us together? Even if I were Erys’s true and only love, he would have thousands of other thoughts and feelings passing through his mind that had nothing to do with me. And he would have no idea I was coming to find him. He could be thinking of his father. His favorite dish of food. I didn’t know. But the chances he would be

thinking of me, just as I needed him to, and then . . . what? How were those shared feelings supposed to bring our souls together?

Maybe there was enough magic in this place that if I thought of him, hard enough, Erys would know and respond in kind. Like he would if he felt me spying on him or heard me call his name. It still seemed unlikely, but the idea had enough logic for me to squash my doubts down long enough to try it.

I had to try something.

"Erys?" I said it out loud, trying to focus my thoughts in that direction.

My brother shined like the sun. I pictured his curly hair. His easy smile. He darted about, trying to make himself seem larger than the scrawny boy he was, but he also had a smugness in his eyes that said he knew something no one else did.

I thought of the first time I saw him in an island cove, throwing back a fish and sparing its life after I had been told that all men were demons. How I had felt drawn to him.

Could I feel drawn to him now? I took a small step forward.

"Maybe this way?"

Serena frowned. "You don't sound very sure."

"I'm not." But I took another small step, still trying to think of the boy I called my brother.

Erys always was a great mystery to me. If I didn't count Naman—and I didn't—Erys was the first boy I had ever spoken to, but more than that, he was never quite what he appeared. I thought he let me into his home in the palace because he was completely unaware of how dangerous my family was. As it turned out, the opposite was true. He had figured out my family were sirens the first day I met him, and he wanted to help me.

He built so many plans I never understood until they all fell into place.

I kept walking until I realized there was more than one set of footsteps coming after me.

I turned. The ferryman was still following us like a reaper of death.

CHAPTER 15

Surreally, the floating souls had settled into the background of my mind, but I still glared at the spirit walking beside us. “What are you still doing here?”

The ferryman shrugged and leaned back onto his oar, using it like a walking stick. “I’m watching. You’re entertaining.”

I glared. We weren’t here for anyone’s entertainment, least of all one of Valadern’s minions. “Don’t you have a job to do?” I pointed back in the direction of the river I could no longer see through the dim light but could still hear.

“You put a hole in my ship.”

“That wasn’t my fault!” I felt pressed to remind him and the whole of the underworld. Anyone should be able to see that I had defended us.

He only raised an eyebrow. “Really? In all my years of being a ferryman, I have never been attacked by the other spirits. Something about you is different, so of course I’m curious to see how this all plays out.” He pulled his oar from the dirt. “Besides, there is more competition for souls nowadays. Until another one comes in, all I have to do is watch you.”

I seized on the words. No matter how much I loathed him, I wanted that part to be true. “Competition? So not all souls come here.” Things might not be as dire as it seemed.

“Only the ones sworn to Valadern and the other old gods. He doesn’t have a lot of power over those who don’t believe in him.”

That fit with the faded images of the judges and Cerberus. It even sounded similar to what Sister Leah had said—that the old gods only had the power we gave them and only went where they were invited.

I felt the weight of her rosary cross on my neck, but it didn't comfort me as much as I had hoped. The truth was, I wanted to believe Valadern had the power to bind a soul.

If he didn't, Erys would be beyond my reach.

I might have liked to think of my brother in some heaven, but we needed him to be here now. I could not believe and hope for a chance to save Erys and still deny Valadern's power. But how could the boy who was always so much cleverer than me have gotten himself stuck down here? Erys believed in Valadern. He had been threatened by sirens too often not to believe in them. But to actually swear to a dark god and accept this afterlife over the teachings of the nuns who helped raise him . . . What would make Erys do that?

Serena pulled at my arm, turning me away from the ferryman and all the doubts his words had triggered. "Just ignore him, and let's keep going."

I nodded, a part of me rejoicing that my sister still had some strength where I was weak. Since coming here, she had been so quiet and pale she could have passed as a lost spirit herself.

I resigned myself to working under the ferryman's hooded gaze and tried to think of Erys again. But some of the thoughts were still hard to go over. At one point, I really thought I loved Erys, and not just as a brother. Heat filled my cheeks, and some of my embarrassment returned, thinking of the night he refused to kiss me.

The night he told me he still intended to fulfill his duty as a prince and marry Helene instead.

My feet faltered, and I had to fix my sandal again. "I feel so silly."

"Why? You love Erys," Serena said.

"Yes, but . . ." I took another step, and my shoulder rammed into solid stone. "Well, now we know this doesn't work." My so-called bond had led me crashing into a wall, leaving a trail of mud and slime running up my arm.

Dead water and now dead slime. Oh, how I hated this place.

The ferryman shook his head. "Or we know he's behind that wall."

I ran my hand over the stone. Knocking produced a hollow sound. Maybe it wasn't as thick as I feared. "So . . . tunnel through it?" How could we do that? Neither of us carried pickaxes.

"Or we turn and follow the wall until we find another path forward."

“Like a maze? This place is a maze?” My heart raced as I thought of stories of the great Labyrinth. Twisted paths leading to countless dead ends and a monstrous bull-headed creature with fangs.

The ferryman shrugged back at me.

Perfect. This was going to take forever—bond or no bond. And the deeper we went, the more likely it seemed that we would stumble upon a monster. Here, in a place where all the old myths had come to life. But I supposed I always knew that. Valadern would not make this easy.

I still had to keep going. For Erys.

I pulled out my dagger and turned. “Fine,” I said, and we continued into the darkness.

We moved in silence, hearing only distant moans and the steady drip of falling water. I held my arms together against the musty chill of this place. And though I knew it hadn’t been that long, it seemed I hadn’t seen the sun in ages. The faster we could leave, the better.

But when we finally reached the end of the long wall and could turn, I screamed. The wind answered my call, and even though we were underground, I thought I heard thunder.

That was enough to knock the shadowed figure I had seen off its feet.

CHAPTER 16

Since my so-called soul connection and I had been leading the way, Serena and the ferryman ran a few steps to stand with me. “What happened?” the ferryman asked.

“Sorry. It only startled me.” And my heart still raced at the sight of the withered form.

The creature might have been human and still had the general frame of a man, but the skin was so stretched and hollowed out. Like the lost souls in the water. But really, it was more pathetic than frightening. It had fallen from a simple push of wind. It flailed its limbs but could not rise.

Maybe Serena had been right to pity the souls who had attacked us. It was like an upturned crab I might have reached out and tried to right myself if I weren’t worried my touch would rip its fragile bones.

And the ferryman just turned his back to it completely. “No. I mean, what happened? What did you do?” He waved around to indicate how the air had moved the rocks around us.

My cheeks grew hot. “It’s . . . my magic.”

“You have magic? How?”

I hesitated. Should I explain it to him? But he had already seen it, and there was precious little I understood enough myself to make it a worthwhile secret. “I don’t know, but my mother had it too. She had it before she swore to Valadern.”

“And it throws rocks around?” He pointed to the stones my windstorm had scattered.

“Sometimes. It also calls rain and lightning bolts. I don’t know why.”

“It creates storms?” The ferryman shook his head. “Well, that might explain one thing.”

I waited, but he didn’t go on.

“What does it explain?” I had to press him.

“How many people do you expect Valadern lets down here? Living people?”

For some reason, my chest grew tight and defensive at the thought—like he was calling us stupid for not suspecting something so obvious as the unhelpfulness of Valadern and the ulterior motives baked into every action he took. “He didn’t just let us in,” I said. “I promised my soul to him if I failed.”

“Yes, but he has a large collection of souls.” He gestured to the figure on the ground. “Valadern wouldn’t make such a bargain if there wasn’t something he particularly hoped to gain from your soul that he wouldn’t have otherwise.”

I made the rest of the connections for myself. “He wants my magic? But I barely want it myself. I can’t control it and have no idea where it came from.” But even as I protested the thought, I could see the sense in it. Valadern had wanted my voice specifically before agreeing to let me go to Solis. Maybe he only wanted my soul now so he could claim my voice again.

Permanently.

“In that case,” the ferryman said, “maybe you should ask the old storm king yourself.”

“Storm king?”

“What do you call him now . . . Jupiter? Zeus? Lord Lightning Bolt?”

I balked. “The king of gods?”

“Well, that one’s a little presumptuous but sure.”

His voice was so casual, all I could do was stare for a moment. I didn’t love the old gods, but even I wouldn’t risk summoning the wrath of one who was supposed to be their king. “You think he might know where my powers came from? But would he tell me?”

He quirked one eyebrow. “That would be the question, wouldn’t it? You won’t know until you ask.”

“So, I would what? Climb Mount Olympus?” I was in the underworld, but breaching the stronghold of all the old gods still had to be impossible.

“Why not? Worst he can do is send you back here.”

I paused, slowly agreeing with his logic. I had no idea what I would be doing after rescuing Erys and helping Serena. But if I ever managed to do all that, why couldn't I conquer Mount Olympus? "But I don't know anything about him. About any of the other gods, really." All I knew beyond what was already said was that the gods of the sky, sea, and underworld were brothers. No one in that family could be safe. "What about you, Serena? Do you know anything about Zeus?"

Her silence during our discussion seemed unnatural. And even when she spoke, her eyes were far away. "Not Zeus, but I . . . I used to pray to Hades," my sister offered, a bit abruptly. But I supposed in this place, thoughts of Hades were unavoidable.

"Because of Mother?" Did she force my sisters to pray to all the old gods?

"No. She would have had me pray to Valadern alone. But your father would tell me stories of all the gods—of the One God and all the ones before Him."

I felt a sharp ping of jealousy. For a moment, I had forgotten that Serena had spent a year with my father before he died—before Mother killed him. I supposed I had been there too, but I hadn't even been a year old and couldn't remember.

I hated that I couldn't remember.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"About Hades?" She shook her head. "There really is only one story I remember. Hades fell in love with the daughter of another goddess. He brought the girl to the underworld and got her to eat some pomegranate seeds. Then she couldn't leave. She became his wife."

"That's why you said not to eat anything." My stomach panged at the reminder.

Stupid death gods and their stupid rules. If there was one thing about being a princess I had enjoyed, it was the endless supply of food the palace provided.

Now even that had been snatched away.

"Yes," Serena said. "But that's it—all of it. He loved Persephone. The other gods had countless mistresses and caused a dozen wars, but he . . . didn't."

"So, you prayed to him because you didn't know anything about him? Just because you thought he loved the wife he abducted?"

“Not just that. I just . . . I didn’t see him as others do. I knew Valadern caused, or at least, relished death. Some other gods did too. They picked out their champions—their heroes—and set them against each other like death matches in the Solian amphitheater.”

It was an apt description. I thought of my first experience with the coliseum and shuddered. Jonas had been fighting for his position in a match that could have ended in his death. I had cried while others, including the emperor, cheered and placed their bets. It seemed all the darkness in Solis was a reflection of the old gods they once worshiped.

Or perhaps the gods were dark because of the darkness in Solis. Perhaps gods and their worshipers were linked on both sides.

Serena continued, her voice haunted and far away. “I saw bodies on the island washed up from accidents or disease. I saw Mother kill. Death was all around. And I just thought—someone should be taking care of them. All of them. And I thought that person, that *being*, would have to be kind, kinder than all the rest of the gods. Smarter too, if his realm is peaceful, and ours is not. I guess I saw Hades more as a shepherd, a watchman of lost souls.”

Well, many of these souls seemed to need a watchman. They had stumbled into us more than enough times. I wondered if there were actually any new souls among them, any who actually remembered the men they used to be.

Serena’s voice carried into the darkness. “So, when I saw a corpse, I would pray to Hades and ask him to watch their spirits. Somehow that made the deaths easier. I still pray to him when I go to the graveyard. But it’s different now.” She sounded truly mournful then.

She spoke of Hades with more passion than she did of Aides, and the ferryman was staring. She had even shut up our irritating spirit guide.

“Before, when I prayed, I really felt like he listened,” Serena said. “I would feel this peace. Now, I don’t. So maybe he’s gone. Maybe he faded—if people don’t believe in him anymore. Perhaps I have simply matured, and he was never there at all.”

I frowned. “But people *do* believe in him. I hear people swear by him at least.” I had done it myself a few times. He should last longer than the skeletal judges or Cerberus. Longer than the ferryman. Maybe even longer than the underworld itself.

But that didn’t make Serena any happier. “Then he must hate me now. Seems everyone does.” She tightened a fist and walked ahead.

CHAPTER 17

As we continued to walk through the dark passages of the underworld, the stones around us made a familiar pattern. Carved windows and doorways appeared like the hollow outline of Solian buildings. Walking souls moved in the passages with us—pressing closer and closer together as we went along. Some even called from the doorways in unintelligible groans, mimicking street venders.

They were acting out their former lives—whatever they remembered.

Most didn't seem to notice us, and I tried to encourage this. It made passing through them go a bit quicker. And the ones who reached for us seemed so hostile, I used my blade or summoned storms to fend them off without discussion. I didn't enjoy the act, but it had to be done, and I was content to be the one to do it. I didn't trust the ferryman, and Serena had suffered enough.

It was hard to mark any sort of time in this place, but eventually we needed rest. We called that one day—one day in the underworld.

We made camp in an empty alcove that branched out from the main tunnel and streets of wandering souls like an alleyway. It even had some of the same painted graffiti. I dropped my pack to rest against the stone, right next to: "Blue to win," and "Marcellus was here," along with an illegible scrawl that was probably obscene.

I frowned. In Solis, "Blue" was a chariot team. "They still care about chariot races down here?" I hadn't seen any animals among the wandering souls.

The ferryman shrugged. My sister was already resting in a nest she had made of spare linen, but I wondered if the spirit guide actually needed to

sleep. He sat without reaching for anything but his oar. “I was never quite sure why they cared about chariot racing up there. The horses just run in a circle, right?”

I didn’t answer him. As I looked up at the chasm of rock, I wondered if we had somehow stumbled into Tartarus. It was all so . . . dark and depressing. The constant drip of murky water. The absence of the sun. The souls just wandering around, lost. The traces of society that reminded me of the poorer parts of the city where everyone was stacked on top of each other with their filth.

Like the part of the city where my sisters worked, but worse.

But no, the ferryman said this was still Asphodel—the middle place. “It’s a city. This is how most cities would be remembered by its citizens. But perhaps you are simply more used to hearing tales about the heavens created by the One God.”

I squinted at him through the dark. “You know of Him too?”

The ferryman laughed. “Hard to avoid it when He chips away at everything that once was.”

“So . . . this place used to be nicer?” It had to be, before Valadern took over.

That just made the ferryman laugh harder. “Not really, no. The waters of forgetfulness were known to ease some pain, and there used to be a river of fire that could be beautiful, but not enough to counter all the suffering in Asphodel. The old gods were immortal, and those who worshiped them were more concerned about grabbing the pleasures of the world while they roamed it. Perhaps become immortal themselves—to live on in epic poems recounting all their earthly deeds. They simply put Hades over the underworld to watch over all the dead. There was never any talk of redeeming souls or greater kingdoms in the sky.”

“Well, then I guess you can’t blame people for deciding they’d rather believe in something different,” I said, even though I thought it might make him angry.

It didn’t. “Blame them? Sometimes I wish I could join them.”

“Could you?”

That finally sobered him. “I thought I could, once. The price was higher than I expected.”

“What price?”

“There is always a price when you try to bargain with gods. My price made me what I am today.”

“And what were you before?” I asked. He had already said he wasn’t human. I didn’t even know if he had a name besides “ferryman,” and my curiosity had been piqued in spite of myself.

He stared out at Serena for a moment before answering, and it was the last I heard from him that evening. “Many things. So many things. But mostly, I was a shepherd.”

There was never enough food on my island. I hunted small game and grew food in my own garden with mixed results. My mother and sisters brought me fish when they remembered, but more often than not, they forgot. I had fasted far longer than a day before, and I thought we should be able to go two more without too much trouble, but I already felt a restlessness in my gut and a dryness in my throat.

The faster we could do this, the better.

We woke after a few hours, and I thought of Erys again. But instead of a swell of love, all I got was annoyance. Where was he hiding? Was he really stuck, or was this another clever plan he had forgotten to explain to me? I might wring his neck when I found him, if such a thing were possible.

But apparently our “bond” didn’t require that all my thoughts of him be flattering. I felt the pull and took another step into the maze and crowd of withered souls.

One of the souls reached out to me.

I called to the wind. It came in a concentrated gale, like a fist, and knocked the walking corpse down before it could touch me. I was getting better—so that was something at least. And I would have to keep getting better if we were going to be attacked like this all the time. “Why do these things keep chasing us?”

The ferryman pointed a long finger back at me. “Not us. Only you.”

“Me?”

“They are drawn to you. Perhaps the energy you are putting out reminds them of their former lives, and they want it for themselves.”

Serena dropped her head at this news. Again, she must have been pulled into the plight of all the lost and wandering souls. But I had already determined that we must stay focused on Erys and Aides alone.

“Well, I have to put energy out, don’t I? How else am I supposed to find Erys?” That was the whole point.

The ferryman just shrugged. Like this trouble was unavoidable.

I sighed and turned to Serena. “Why don’t you try it for a while? Feel your bond for Aides so we can find him?” Then I could blast the souls while she focused her energy. Erys and Aides might even be in the same place since Valadern knew we would be searching for both.

Serena shook her head, keeping her eyes low. “I have been. It doesn’t work. I tried, and I just felt . . . like I should stay where I was.”

“Like, we passed him?” I looked behind us to the windows and doors carved into the stone. Could we have walked by an earthen building with him inside it?

“No. It doesn’t work. I feel the same no matter where we go. It isn’t just one location.”

I frowned because I knew what Serena must be thinking: That maybe Aides had been dead too long to form a bond with. Or maybe he didn’t want a bond with her. But there had to be another answer. “Just keep trying. It will work,” I said with more confidence than I truly felt.

I had to help her, and when I had wanted to connect with Erys, I had started at the beginning. Maybe she should too.

And maybe the feeling would be stronger if she said the words out loud?

“Maybe you should tell me more about him? The day you met?” And really, I just wanted to know at this point. All about the forbidden romance my elder sister somehow had without me ever knowing it was happening.

We had plenty of ground still to cover and time to kill while we walked.

“I . . .” Serena paused, and then she shrugged. “Well, I guess it was because of you.”

“What?” I certainly would have remembered that.

“When I found you in the shrine? After Titera killed that fish? I knew you were afraid of me becoming a siren and leaving you. I was afraid too. I promised you I would come back, but I didn’t know if that was a promise I could actually keep if I became a siren.”

I thought back to my eight-year-old self, but at her prompting, I saw our interaction from Serena's eyes. She had always seemed so much older and wiser, but she had only been fifteen. Of course she had been terrified to become a siren, just like I had always been, but she had wanted to be strong for me, no matter what it cost. "So what did you do?"

She shrugged. "I didn't know what to do, so I prayed. To Hades. It didn't have anything to do with him really—it was Valadern I would have to swear to—but Hades was who I always preferred to pray to. I asked him if he would help me, to make it so I could keep my promise to you or not become a siren at all. I was praying aloud near the sea, and then I turned around, and Aides was there. Standing on the beach."

"Just out of nowhere?"

Serena nodded, her eyes far away. "He was . . . pale. Dark hair. Skinny. He asked me what I was doing, and I . . . I ran."

The ferryman scoffed, reminding me that he was still walking beside us and listening to everything we said. "Was he really so scary? Some skinny kid?"

"Yes!" Serena insisted. "I had never seen a man there before, not since Ari's father died. But he said he heard me praying, and he wanted to help me. He told me he didn't think I would forget about you, Ari, or anything about my old life if I became a siren, but I didn't believe him. He was a stranger, and how should he know anything about being a siren?"

"Yes," the ferryman agreed dryly. "He should have known better than to tell you that."

"That's exactly what he said!" Her smile became so bright it wasn't recognizable on her pale face. She had become completely enraptured by the memory, and I was sure it was helping. "He said that he shouldn't have said that, but if I truly was afraid of being a siren, then I didn't have to be one at all. He would help me, and we could leave the island together."

Well, I already knew that hadn't happened, since my sister never left the island before becoming a siren. But I still wanted to know how it had been. "Did you want to go with him?"

"Yes. No." She fidgeted. "I only just met him, and to leave like that, to abandon all of you . . . I just wasn't sure. I wouldn't give him a straight answer, and I thought he might leave without me, but he didn't. I found him a place to hide on the island. I kept sneaking away to see him, to give him

food, to make sure he was hidden, or just to talk and then . . .” She touched her lips.

“You kissed?” I cried, somehow scandalized at the thought. She might have been a siren and a working woman before, but she was still my much older sister who raised me like a mother.

“Not at first! He was just telling me about other places, other things we could see and do together if we left the island. He said we could live our lives together like all the other humans did, and he tried to explain what the provinces were like and . . . so many other things.”

“Kind of a know-it-all, wasn’t he?” the ferryman asked, but there was something different in his tone. Not as dry. He was grinning like he had won something.

Serena smiled, happy to draw him further into the story. “Maybe a little awkward? He didn’t want to lie, so he was always telling me the exact details about everything I might see, and I suppose it could have seemed a bit dry—not a real story like Ari’s father might tell, but it was sweet, and I wanted to learn. It sounded so magical, so different. I wanted . . . I was so young . . .”

“You kissed,” I said, because I could almost see it then. My sister free from all her chains of hardship, standing with a boy as close as she was now standing with the ferryman.

Except this boy would have been flesh and blood and full of the same bright spirit as Erys when he had wanted to tell me all about his world beyond the island.

“Yes.” A light blush colored her cheeks, but her smile didn’t fade. “I had only known him for a few weeks, but it felt like more. I still couldn’t get myself to leave our family, but I started to think I could keep him a secret forever and never have to make a choice.”

“But you did make a choice.” The ferryman took a step back from her then, the words an accusation.

“No,” Serena said with a sudden force. “Titera did. She saw us. She told Mother, and . . .” Her voice cracked and fell. “I begged her. I said I’d send him away, never speak to him again. Mother said I had been deceived. Didn’t I realize he would say and do anything to lure me off the island? To escape himself? Did I really think that I was special? That he could love me?”

“And Titera took him,” I said. Serena had already told me this part of the story, and those haunting images had never left me.

“Yes,” she said, her voice numb and a little distant. “She came to him. Kissed him, made me watch. Mother said that proved it—he never loved me or anyone.”

The ferryman scrunched his face, like tasting something sour. “Titera? He never kissed that awful sea witch. Or at least, I don’t see why he would.”

“Because Titera was a *siren*.” I pushed the dark spirit aside before he could hurt my sister with his words and senseless accusations. “It doesn’t prove anything. Aides could have loved you alone.” I said the words, and I truly believed them, but it didn’t seem to help.

The brightness of the moment had already faded from all of us.

“Yes, I know,” she said softly. “I knew it then too. But I still had to kill him. They already won, and it was the only way to make it stop.” She fell farther back behind us, shaking her head. Her hair draped over her downcast eyes. “I can’t do this anymore, Ari. I thought I could feel him, but I just don’t.”

We passed parts of the underground city that reminded me of the temple and artisan districts—albeit a grimy, poorer version of both. Even an amphitheater, though I had no interest in seeing what kind of spectacle it might hold. And it didn’t take long before my connection to Erys led me into another wall. I gave the stone a light kick in frustration and had to fix my loose sandal again. Serena’s failure to feel for Aides had already made me more skeptical about my own efforts, and this just seemed to be the final straw stacked against us. There had to be another way. A faster way that didn’t encourage the other souls to attack me. The answer came to me then, so suddenly I was almost ashamed I hadn’t thought of it earlier. I blamed it on the hunger pangs.

“If this is a city, is there a palace?” I asked. It seemed to have everything else.

The ferryman nodded. He pointed vaguely in one direction, but I was sure I didn’t need it. I knew where to find the palace in Solis, and I could

find it here without any soul connection.

Perhaps that was all the soul connection was supposed to do all along. If I thought about Erys, and I loved him, then I should know what he would remember of his former life and where his soul would be drawn to.

And my brother was an arrogant prince who belonged in a palace.

“Then why don’t we go there?” I phrased it as a question, though my mind had already been made up. I refused to run blindly into walls again while we slowly starved to death.

The ferryman darkened under his hood. “I would not recommend that.”

“You don’t have to come.” I couldn’t deny his advice so far had been better than the nothing we had started out with, but I had grown to resent it too.

I had come to help my sister and save my brother. Most of the time when I asked a question, I hoped she would answer, and we could work it out together. But instead, it was the ferryman. Always the ferryman. If going somewhere he didn’t want to be was what it took to be rid of him, so much the better.

I turned around, ready to lead the way.

CHAPTER 18

The ferryman didn't leave, but he got far less pleasant. The next time I fended off an unruly soul, he yelled at me. "Do you have to call in a storm every time?"

"I have to defend us." I was so tired of having to explain that.

"I didn't tell you not to. I would just ask that you not make this place worse for those of us who can't leave it." He pointed to all the rubble, bones, and other trash I had blown back into the streets. It really looked rather miserable.

Was he trying to make me feel badly for him? Should I?

But before I could decide, he strode over to Serena looking nothing but hostile. He pulled her from behind the rubble where she had tried to hide herself and some of the other wandering souls from the destruction I had caused. "How were you ever a demon?" he asked her with scorn.

"It's different when you're a siren," Serena said, giving a longer explanation than I would have expected. Certainly, more of an explanation than she had ever given me. "You're not human anymore. You don't have your soul; you don't feel. I was so empty, all the time. But when I could feed on a man, I could taste his soul before he faded. Feel him. Like being hollow and dead, then alive again. But that just made it worse when it was gone, to crave it more and more. And you start to see the other humans differently too. They can't feel the water or call to it as you can. It's like looking at . . . a sheep. The hunger builds inside of you . . ." She shrugged. "I suppose I expected it to be awful, and the first one was, but you get used to it."

"You weren't a siren when you butchered your first 'sheep.'"

The venom in his voice surprised me. I had assigned myself the task of defending us from the wandering souls. If I wasn't going to complain, then he should have no cause to.

And nothing justified the way he spoke of Serena's past. A past that already haunted her far more than it should.

I tried to put myself between them, but Serena answered him anyway.

"No. I was a girl, weaker and more frightened than I should have been." Tears formed in her eyes, but there was also a new strength building there as well. A spark of life that sought to defend herself from him, even if she could not defend herself from anyone else. "Titera had him. She kissed him, and I knew it was a spell. I knew he loved me, and I thought I loved him too, but they were going to kill him no matter what I did. Titera kissed him, and when that didn't work, she tortured him, biting him, and I couldn't stop her. He cried my name, and I just thought . . ."

My sister cried. I never knew what to do with tears—mine or anyone else's—but I tried to hold her hand, to show that she didn't have to continue to relive that awful scene again just to please the dark spirit before us, but she kept pressing on anyway.

"And I thought that if I did it myself, it would be kinder. That I could free his spirit at least. I told Mother I would do it, and she let me go. She gave me a knife, and Titera dropped him at my feet. He was bleeding out and couldn't get up. But he called for me again, and they let me go to him. I held him. I told him I loved him and that I wanted to help him. I don't know if he heard me, but he didn't fight. Maybe he *couldn't* fight. I don't know. But I loved him, so I kissed him, and then I killed him."

She dropped her head, her words a tearless breath of relief now that the story was over. "And when he died in my arms, when I had to take his heart, I think I wanted to become a soulless demon. If I couldn't leave my family and escape all the darkness there, then I didn't want to be human or feel anything anymore. I broke. I was a girl, and I just wanted the blood to end, but I should have known. The blood never ended."

The ferryman went still, and his next question was as mild as a whisper. "And when you see Aides again, what do you hope to do?"

"Whatever he will let me do," Serena said. No hesitation. "He might not accept my apology, but if there is anything I can do to bring him life again or to help his spirit rest, I would do it."

And whether the ferryman believed her or not, I knew it was true.

I thought I might have to run interference for my sister and the ferryman for the rest of the day, but they kept their distance on their own. The ferryman strayed so far behind, I wondered if he was about to leave us for good, but I wasn't troubled by the thought.

"You don't have to follow us," I reminded him again. And for all the tears he made my sister shed, I would have been more than happy to see him go.

"You put a hole in my ship," he answered back. "And the only wood in the underworld is in the fields of Elysium. I'll have to go there to get it, and so far, we are going the same way. There are many ways down to Tartarus, but only one way up."

I followed his gaze up the street. There was a palace, right where I thought it would be, but there was more. A staircase led from the inner atrium up to a place beyond the cavern walls.

I was taking us toward Elysium.

CHAPTER 19

When we reached the palace gates, my heart fluttered with a familiarity I didn't quite expect. After walking the long and dreary streets of the underworld, climbing up those steps was like coming home again. I looked among the souls surrounding the entrance, half-expecting a familiar guard to greet us. *My* guard.

Jonas would scold me first. I was certainly being reckless enough to deserve it, but then, he would smile. I would make him smile. He could never stay cross with me for long, and he could never stop his face from showing exactly how he felt. This place was so dark and chill that I warmed a bit just thinking of him. His wide arms. His bright smile. The almond musk and oil that came from preparing his body for hundreds of drills and arena exercises.

I touched my hand, wishing I could feel his fingers in mine again. His arms around me. Maybe—just maybe—something more?

But then I paled. This was not Solis, and Jonas did not belong in the underworld any more than he had belonged in a brothel. His perfect, radiant goodness belonged in the world above, and I was a far way off from completing my journey here. I had to go farther down before I could rise again and dream of a time when my soul would match his.

I just missed him and all the lights of my former life above ground.

Erys had to have felt drawn to the palace as well. I couldn't really feel him here, but I supposed I never really expected to feel him anywhere.

As we continued deeper into the palace, the familiarity only increased. I saw some of the same near-nude statues and other decorations that filled the halls of the palace in Solis. Souls who must have been slaves in former lives

still filled their roles, offering to assist us in gestures and the strange grunting language they shared with those on the streets.

Serena shook her head. “They still work here even after they died?”

I shrugged. “Perhaps they liked their work.”

“Yes, that must be it.” The ferryman rolled his eyes, carrying the same disdain he had when asking my sister how she could be a demon.

I tried to ignore him and the rest of the haunting figures in the palace, but Serena stopped at each one. Dropping to one knee, she even tried to speak to a smaller soul—a child soul. She fell behind while the ferryman strode ahead with the confidence of someone who not only knew the workings of palace life but knew *this* palace.

All the suspicions I held against the ferryman on our trek flared to life again. I had to know what he was doing. So I left Serena with some cheerful bath slaves and followed him into the banquet hall. I watched as he walked up to the head of the table where the emperor would have sat. An empty skeleton rested there instead—like one of the faded judges by the river—but the ferryman bowed his head and put down his coin purse like paying tribute.

Then he took food from the table.

If I didn’t hate him already, I hated him for that. I could ignore my hunger at times, but not with someone gorging on a full feast in front of me.

And that was hardly the only grievance here.

“You live here? Then why didn’t you want us to come here?”

“Because it’s dangerous,” he said. I didn’t know if he had noticed me watching him before, but it didn’t seem to trouble him. He sat back on one of the long couches, and for the first time, his dark hood fell from his face to reveal a mane of jet-black hair and skin as pale as porcelain. The contrast in his features seemed too stark to be natural, but then, the ferryman wasn’t natural.

He told us he was a spirit without a soul, and I needed to remember that.

He spread out his hands, holding his plate and wine goblet, to gesture around the empty banquet hall. “The whole underworld belongs to Valadern, and I pay my tribute to him, like all the rest of the spirits. And if he were to come here himself, where do you think he would go?”

I followed his gaze to the central chair where the emperor would lounge if we were in Solis. But we weren’t actually in Solis anymore. Valadern ruled here.

The ferryman put his feet on the table as he started to pick through his feast of exotic poultry and bread soaked in olive oil. “Things would go a bit faster if you trusted what I say.”

“You work for Valadern.”

The ferryman didn’t flinch. “Yes, but you never asked me if I enjoyed it. Or do you truly believe what you said out there? That all slaves enjoy their work and love their masters?”

“No.” My answer hadn’t been a real answer. Just something to say to my sister while I continued on my own path. But I tried to think of a real one now. There were hundreds of slaves in Solis. Maybe thousands. And most came to it by war or birth. “Perhaps they don’t know another way to be. Or perhaps . . . perhaps there is still something or someone forcing them into service.”

The ferryman toasted my point with a wine goblet. “And so, while it’s true that I serve a function Valadern currently has dominion over, that says nothing about who I am and what my own desires for myself might be.”

“And what are your desires?”

“It’s a bit late to be asking that now, don’t you think? After all the time we’ve spent with each other?”

“Well, I’m sure Serena asked you.” I couldn’t be responsible for everything.

His face softened a little. “Yes, she is a better sort than you, but she still got it wrong.”

“Wrong? What did she get wrong?”

“About the pomegranate. Hades stole Persephone from her mother; it was how things were done back then, and how everyone expected a god to behave—to take what they wanted and were strong enough to keep. It was how they explained the death and renewal of the Spring Goddess every year. But there is justice in death not found in the mortal world. Hades did not force Persephone to eat the pomegranate; he didn’t wish to keep a captive and unwilling wife. It was her mother who was against the match. But Persephone knew once she took the pomegranate, she would have to spend part of the year in the underworld, and her mother could not stop her.”

“You’re saying Persephone chose to stay and marry death? Why would anyone do that?”

“Why, indeed?” He put down his goblet and stood. “I told you from the beginning that Valadern only ordered me to ferry you across the river and into the underworld. He gave me no order after that. I hadn’t decided what I wanted to do before, but I have now. I will not follow you anymore. Now that we are here, I will find wood to repair my ship and return to the river.”

The words came as a slap, making me forget for a moment that I had never wanted him to follow us in the first place. Then I squared my shoulders and formed my own reply. “Well, good. We don’t need you.” I turned on my heels and stomped off. I had finally gotten what I wanted and chased the foul spirit away, and I couldn’t be more glad.

Or at least, I wanted to be glad, but I only felt hollower when I left the room and saw a few more of Valadern’s enslaved souls rushing about. But I could make this work.

The halls of this palace were still familiar.

I went to the balcony, like the one Erys and I had often stood on together to overlook the sea. Now it overlooked the grand, spiraling staircase that circled past the cavern ceiling and down into the earth. “Where are you, Erys?” I asked, not expecting an answer.

I was supposed to be bonded to him, but now I wondered if I truly knew the boy I called my brother at all.

Erys was a prince. It made sense for him to remember being in a palace if he had been allowed to travel the underworld based on his own memories. But then, did Erys truly wish to be a prince? Or was he driven into it by birth and expectations, the same as any other slave? The same as I was? Without his father or a city he remembered, perhaps the palace would feel as empty to him as it did to me.

And that was assuming Erys had any choice on where he ended up. Valadern took Erys on purpose. He knew I was coming after him.

And the thought had me looking down toward Tartarus again.

After all the traveling we had done to get here, I was certain another full day had passed. Day two in the underworld. Only one left. Maybe more, but I really didn’t like our chances without at least something to drink. Was the water here as dangerous as the food? The legend of Persephone only spoke

of the pomegranate specifically. It would be a risk, but if it was that or die of thirst, then it might be worth it.

But I wasn't that desperate yet. Far from it. All the water here reminded me of the death water of the river Styx. I wrinkled my nose and refused to get in the pool the bath slaves offered. I only collected Serena and tried to leave, though soon I wanted to curse her too for her cheerful expression. "Did you find Erys?" she asked, with far too much innocence.

"No," I answered. All I had done was chase off the ferryman and decreased our party. I hadn't added to it, and perhaps I never would. I was a force much better suited to destruction. But after making another camp for the night in a room that reminded me of my own bedchamber at the palace, I tried feeling for Erys again.

The moans from the spirits suddenly stopped, leaving the room deathly still.

Both of the silent palace slaves already in the room turned to stare at me. Another three entered through the open columns. New scuffs and sounds of footsteps in the halls told me that more were on their way. Before, the wandering souls that came after us appeared one at a time. Now, the palace slaves had us surrounded. When I sent my energy outward, they swarmed together into a mob that seemed more focused, more hostile.

They would have the energy we carried by force.

CHAPTER 20

I screamed, and though I heard distant thunder and wind, the mob remained untouched. Inside the walls of the underworld's palace, we had gone too far, and the space was too tight for outside elements to be any help. And without the storms, my voice was nothing more than the desperate scream of a hapless damsel. It had no effect on the souls around us. If anything, they seemed more dangerous.

My fear, my energy strengthened them.

One walking corpse hit a vase and shattered it with as much force as an arena champion. I stood in front of my sister, warding off flying pottery shards and making my final stand with my dagger alone. I wasn't strong enough to defeat the coming horde, but Sister Leah's voice entered my head, telling me this place would only have the strength I gave it.

I didn't think this was what she meant, but after my dagger caught in a corpse's shoulder, I reached for her rosary cross.

I touched it at the same time as a reaching corpse.

A gale swept the room. The image of the corpse flickered, showing for a moment a young girl of the same height. But her stola had been mended, her head crowned with thick flaxen locks. She was healthy. Beautiful. A creature of light. Then she was gone.

The corpse dropped to the floor as an actual dead body should.

Everything stopped for a moment.

"Wh-what did you do?" Serena asked, trembling against the far wall.

How was I supposed to know? And before I could even try to puzzle it out, a crack sounded above us. A fissure line lengthened across the palace wall and up to the ceiling.

The storm that had been buffeting the walls poured down all at once, a flash flood.

“Run!” I yelled to Serena, even before I felt the first drop. I grabbed back my knife from the corpse’s shoulder and then her hand so we would not be separated as we ran through the flowing torrent of water falling around us. I pulled us through one quick turn, then another. Something tugged back on my ankle and then my hair, but their grasps broke as we ran. We pushed through the horde of struggling souls at random and did not stop until we reached the inner atrium and faced the stone wall. For one horrible moment I wondered if the souls had herded us there on purpose, but then I saw the stairs spiraling both up and down.

Elysium and Tartarus.

I had belted my knife for the run but, still gasping for breath, Serena stared in horror at the cross I clutched in my hand. “You brought that? Do you want to destroy the place? With us inside it?”

I had never considered such a possibility. How could I have? But, as Leah had said, much of this place was built by belief in the old gods. It seemed the cross was enough to send down a torrent of water, threatening to bury what was left of this version of the underworld. More souls would be lost to the river Styx as it overtook more and more of this dark place.

“Where’s the ferryman?” she asked next.

I gasped for more breath, not really trying to answer. I had no idea. I had only thought to grab for my sister in the crisis. He said he wouldn’t follow us, but he should still be in the palace somewhere, suffering from the destruction I had caused.

Serena stared out into the abyss after him, but we couldn’t stay here. The shape of the wall above us siphoned off the falling water from directly hitting us, but it was still rising up around our ankles. And if the water didn’t get us, the regathering mob of souls might.

“He’s a spirit. He’ll be fine.” Or at least we had no time to try and save him. “We need to keep running.”

Serena shook her head at the staircases. “Up or down? Which way is Erys?”

I didn’t know that either. I hoped it was up, but I still worried it would be down.

It *should* be down with how Valadern must feel about Erys.

But with the water falling around us, it seemed we only had one choice. “Climb!”

CHAPTER 21

At first, we ran, but that could not last long. The stone steps were smooth but rail-less and long. Sounds faded. The air thinned. All the distant lights slipped away until it was pitch black, and my feet began to drag. But no one was chasing us. My fear became a distant memory. Just as I thought to turn around and take my chances with the flooding city, light blinded my eyes. Like I had climbed out of a hole, I stepped out into a bright field covered with wheat and tall grass.

The grass hit my knees. Dewdrops covered my sandals and toes.

Soaking in a light like the sun, a thrill of energy went through me. Cuts and bruises faded from my mind. Even my hunger. My worries. Everything. I looked at Serena, and there was a spark in her eyes I had missed. Her smile began slowly, but quickly widened until we both giggled uncontrollably. She started running, and I sprinted after her in a child's game of chase. There was something freeing and marvelous simply to feel the open fields around us. We only stopped when I came to a row of bushy trees laden with ripe red fruit. I merely stared, but Serena's hand darted upward to snatch the new wonder.

I watched its soft skin burst with seeds and could almost taste the juice on my own tongue before understanding the danger.

"Serena! What are you doing? Don't eat it."

She blinked before truly focusing on what she had in her hand. Pomegranate. The same fruit that had bound Persephone to the underworld. Serena dropped the fruit, and I stomped it under the sole of my sandal. What had she been thinking?

What had *I* been thinking?

We had both been lost to the spell of this place for a moment. I had been in the dark for so long that I hadn't thought to brace myself for the light. I never thought that anything in this world might be so attractive.

We were in Elysium Fields, and part of me never wanted to leave. Especially if it meant trekking through the darkness of Asphodel again. But I had stopped us both from taking the pomegranate, and I was still certain I could handle all the charms of this place.

Serena turned back the way we had come. "We should go back. We have to find the ferryman."

I shook my head, forcing myself to refocus on her words. I should have told her of my last conversation with the soulless spirit, that I might have pushed the ferryman from our company for good, but I didn't. I refused to be made to apologize again for something that needed to be done for our protection.

"Serena, he was working for Valadern." I might have taken advantage of his insight while we had it, asking him questions about the new world around us, but I hadn't forgotten who he was. I knew, in the end, that it was far better that our paths had diverged.

"You don't know that," Serena insisted. "He was helping us. How are we supposed to get back across the river Styx without him?"

"We'll find Erys, and he will think of a way," I answered without hesitation. I trusted my brother far more than one of Valadern's creatures.

But my sister was ready to argue again, and it seemed the ferryman had been right about one thing: my sister was far too trusting and tender to have ever been a demon. She never should have been made to become one.

And while I was trying so very hard, my patience was wearing thin.

"Serena," I pleaded, "let's just wait." Now that we had finally reached someplace pleasant, I wasn't in a hurry to leave it. I hadn't even tried to search the fields for Erys. "The storm will pass. The water will settle somewhere in the lower caverns, and then we can look."

Serena paused for another moment before relenting. "Is Erys here?"

"I . . . I don't know." I hoped so. I didn't want to crawl back in that hole without him. The dark and damp seemed so much worse now that I had the sun to compare it to.

I tried to think of Erys, feeling for him, but it didn't lead me in any clear direction.

Serena became impatient. “I’m going to gather some wood. The ferryman said he would need it to repair his boat.”

I didn’t try to argue with her about that one. We needed a break from each other after all the stress. I walked the fields, basking in the sun. A light breeze stirred the wheat and brought my eyes to some more distant groves and idyllic-looking farms, the kind I pictured for myself when I walked beside Jonas and wondered what kind of life I might want besides one of a princess in a place between the palace and the sea. Were the farms another vision, sent here only to taunt me?

I tried to ignore them, thinking of Erys alone.

That’s when I heard it, a faint whisper on the breeze. “Arianna?”

I took another step, barely daring to hope. “Erys?”

CHAPTER 22

"Ari!" The voice shouted back.

"It's him," I said. It had to be. I turned back to find Serena, but she was too lost in her own task to have noticed us, and I didn't want to wait.

Erys was here. He had been counted a hero, despite Valadern. I wondered why he wouldn't come to me on his own, but my former deadline didn't matter anymore, now that I had found him.

If Elysium was a paradise, I was happy to see more of it for myself.

I ran through the field and past a few more trees until I found him. Erys stood in the same tunic he had worn the day he entered the ship to go to Cypari. His curls bounced over his bright eyes as he called to me again. "Ari!"

I raced into his arms. "Erys! Erys!"

He brought me close, and I didn't want to be anywhere else. I kept repeating his name, each time making him seem firmer in my arms. Warmer. More inviting. Distant music played in my ears. And then he kissed me. Not on the hand or the forehead like he had before, but on my lips with a foreign passion that took me by complete surprise.

I pulled away. "What are you doing?" And what would Helene think?

What would Jonas think?

Erys gave me a sheepish, boyish smile. One that said he knew he had done wrong, but he didn't care. "Sorry. I just missed you. I can't believe you're here." He kissed me again, moving from my lips to the veins at my neck.

I brought up my hand—maybe to push him away, but I didn’t. I couldn’t. My strength fell. My hand wobbled. All I did was flail my fingers near my neck. My damp neck.

Blood?

“It hurts.” And more than that, it was wrong. My head spun, and I needed to cling to him to stay upright. “Erys, please stop.” He had to stop so I could think again.

He smiled, but his grip on my waist only tightened. The distant music became louder. “Come on, Ari. I know you want this.”

Perhaps I had wanted this before, but Erys hadn’t. He would never do anything to hurt Helene, and he would not hurt me. “You’re . . . you’re not . . .”

I pulled back but stumbled to the ground without his support.

He frowned at me. My hands found the rosary at my neck in response.

Then his face blurred in my eyes, and I became more certain. “You’re not Erys.”

He laughed, no longer sounding like Erys at all. “What’s the matter, dear? You don’t like this form? I can always take another.” And he did.

His image blurred, and he became Jonas—a scarless, *laughing* Jonas.

Leah.

Mother. All smiling hungrily at me.

I crawled back a step on the grass, but the creature came for me again.

“You’re not Erys!” I screamed, and the storm clouds gathered. Lightning blinded my eyes. Smoke and a burning smell filled my nostrils before I could see again.

The deformed corpse had collapsed in front of me. Trails of fire spread from the spot like a spider web.

I took two stumbling, backward steps before falling into the field, smelling the burnt flesh and still dizzy with blood loss. Surrendering to a sudden wave of tears. I would have never given into the simple temptation of the pomegranate, but that creature was something crueler than I ever could have imagined.

CHAPTER 23

"Ari! Arianna!" Serena called for me over a dozen times. I still didn't answer. Even after the blood on my neck dried and the pain faded to a dull ache, my strength, my very will, was gone. I had come here to save my brother, but some trick of Valadern's had made me slay a vision of him instead.

I didn't know how long I lay in the grass before she found me.

She dropped a pile of sticks she had gathered and sped toward me when she saw the withered soul on the ground—the creature I had killed that once bore my brother's face. That seemed to be all the explanation she needed. "Did it look like Erys?"

I pressed my hand against my neck and closed my eyes, still trying to push the dark images away. "How did you know?"

"They are creatures of Valadern. Maybe not quite the same as sirens, but I thought they might be close."

I opened my eyes. "You could do this?"

She nodded, rubbing at the dark tattoos on her arms. "Sometimes, just a few notes and our natural forms were enough to draw men in. Other times, we had to try harder. The men would say names of other women and I . . . I would wonder what they saw."

"You became what they wanted to see. What you thought they wanted to see." I thought I had understood the true horror of the sirens, but I hadn't. Not until I came under their power myself.

But I had to find a way to make myself strong again. For Erys. For Serena. Even for myself.

I didn't want to stay in this place of nightmares any longer.

I stood then and forced myself to look at the siren that had become Erys—the one who had kissed me. I hadn't wanted that. Not anymore. Perhaps that was the only reason it hadn't worked. The siren-like creature became Erys because I had been sending out my energy to find him, to bond with him. They would have assumed that meant Erys was a romantic love, someone I would have been willing to kiss and stay with long enough for them to finish their attack.

But since I knew the kiss was wrong from the beginning, I could fight it.

And if I continued to seal my heart away, I would be able to fight all the illusions of this place.

Serena gathered her wood and helped me down the spiral staircase to the palace and the central cavern of Asphodel.

The water had drained away. The mob of souls had left the outer atrium, but so was the ferryman.

"Where is he?" Serena asked, like she had truly been expecting him to be standing at the foot of the stairs, waiting for us.

"Do you think a siren got him?" I should have sounded sorrier, but I still was convinced that the ferryman was working for Valadern and would betray us in the end.

But Serena wouldn't agree with that.

"Or maybe he just decided we were too dangerous to carry on with," I said, to appease her.

"Shouldn't we . . . look for him?" She hugged the sticks she carried closer and moved her head around. Then a strange smile appeared on her face. "I feel something."

"Aides? Do you know where to go?"

She was fully grinning now in a carefree way that seemed brighter than anything in Elysium Fields. "Perhaps you were right. Perhaps I was simply too far away before to feel it, but now I know where to go, and I don't want to lose it."

I wanted to be happy for her, but I couldn't be. Not after everything I had seen here. "But don't you think that is suspicious? You couldn't feel

him at all before, and now . . .” I stopped. That wasn’t right. Serena *had* felt something before. She said that she felt she should stay where she was, no matter where she went. And now, with the ferryman gone, and her thinking of him more than Aides, suddenly she had a direction. “Serena, you’re not feeling for Aides. You’re feeling for the ferryman.”

“What? No. I’m sure it’s Aides.” But she frowned like she wasn’t sure at all. “Or even if it is the ferryman, isn’t that a good thing? He can help us __”

“He won’t help us. He is working for Valadern, and with Erys so close . . .”

“How do you know he’s close?”

I didn’t. I just knew we had searched everywhere else. He had to be in Tartarus. But did I really want to bring my sister down there? She couldn’t be trusted against the weakest of souls.

I should never have brought her at all.

“It doesn’t matter, Serena. I’m not going with you to find the ferryman.” As I feared, leaving the artificial sun of Elysium had made the dark of Asphodel seem that much drearier.

I wouldn’t extend our trip just to find someone I had been glad to leave.

Serena frowned, finding the truth without me. “Because you pushed him away.”

“Of course I pushed him away! He works for Valadern!”

“But, Ari, look at this place.” She gestured around the marble columns of the atrium. “Everything here belongs to Valadern. You can’t fight the whole underworld on your own. And even if you could save our lives for now, death will reach us eventually.”

I fought against the weary hopelessness of those words. If I couldn’t keep fighting, I would have nothing left. “So, what exactly is your plan? If you think it is so hopeless, why did you come?”

“To help the lost souls, of course. To make this place better. To defeat Valadern and make up for the lives I have taken. Wasn’t that always the plan?”

This was so ridiculous. I might have had some thoughts of defeating Valadern before coming here, but so far, it was all I could do to save our own lives. And she would have done much less without me. “You think you are going to defeat Valadern by being kind?”

“To those who deserve my kindness, yes.” Serena stood undeterred. “But you need Erys. Go and get him. I can search for Aides and the ferryman alone.”

I glared in response. Did she really think that if I wasn’t there to defend us that somehow the souls here would stop fighting? They attacked us first! She needed me! But I did not need her. Not if she was going to be so impossible.

Finding Erys alone had always been impossible. Adding to that a search for a nearly decade-dead soul and my sister’s frail heart had done nothing but cripple my efforts.

If Valadern could be defeated, she wouldn’t be the one to do it.

“Fine! Go!” I yelled. We had wasted too much time, and I was so tired. I wouldn’t cater to her anymore. It was exhausting having to defend her and fight through the underworld at the same time. But she would be crawling back to me in no time, and by then, I would have Erys and have conquered Tartarus without her. “Just meet me back at the river Styx when you have come to your senses.”

I continued to scowl, but she nodded like we had reached a civilized agreement.

She was really going to go. Despite all my angry words, I still never expected it to come to this. But I wanted her to go. I wouldn’t apologize for being right. I turned my back so she wouldn’t see my tears as I stomped away. Alone. The ferryman was gone. Serena was gone. Jonas was gone, and I had argued with him too before coming here—or at least disagreed with him in a way that Jonas would call an argument. I gave up everything and everyone I had on the surface world to come here, but I was still right, and they all would see it eventually. After I saved them.

I could be the lonely huntress and walk in the moonlight for a while, and without interference from the others, I might finally find my sun.

I felt for Erys again and was immediately drawn downward. I had been right all along, even if Serena wouldn’t see it. Valadern put his followers, his sirens, in Elysium and a truly heroic prince like my brother in Tartarus.

There was no other way forward. I sucked in a breath and plunged down the stairs.

CHAPTER 24

As I walked down another dark staircase, I tried to prepare myself for what I would see in Tartarus. I didn't have my sister to ask anymore, but I knew the depths of the underworld excelled in endless punishment for those who somehow mocked the gods of old. Men had their livers eaten out—multiple times. They were condemned to push boulders up hills only to have them fall. Starving, they would see food just out of reach. Again and again and again these torments and a thousand others repeated in an endless pain-wracked cycle.

Moans in the damp and stagnant air told me some of those punishments were still going on somewhere in the distance. That I expected, but I also thought the lower levels of the underworld should be full of flames. Perhaps, once before, it had been.

But I shivered with increasing cold and more water rushed against the stone.

When I reached the final step, my foot sank down to my ankles in dark water. Had this place always been flooded, or was that the result of the last storm? The storm I had caused? This was the lower place, the place to become lost to the water first if the underworld fell completely.

I shook my head. If the underworld fell? The underworld couldn't fall. It was the underworld. Maybe my sister had gotten into my head more than I realized. Maybe I already missed her. I never wanted to leave her, but what else could I do? She wouldn't listen. And I could only save one doomed sibling at a time.

At the very least, she had been spared from this place.

I hadn’t thought anywhere could be worse than the underground city of Asphodel, but somehow, this place already was. Colder. Darker. Thicker, somehow, the air too close around me. And certainly wetter, with water flowing over my feet. In the deep gloom, I worried that with one misstep I would be sucked down into a flooded chamber. But I had to keep going.

I couldn’t let everything I had done to come here be for nothing.

I had to think of Erys. That was the only guide I had left. I tried to picture his smile, to hear his laugh, but the twisted siren version of him came to me instead.

Down in the darkness, that memory seemed enough to freeze my heart and any forward progress. I couldn’t fight. I shouldn’t have come here at all. I wanted to save my brother, my prince, but maybe it was a fool’s hope from the first, a twisted desire that a siren or Valadern himself would have no trouble manipulating.

Jonas and Sister Leah and everyone else still on the surface might have been right all along. Maybe Erys was beyond saving, and his spirit wasn’t here at all. I just wanted him to be. And as much as I wanted to dismiss my sister’s words and blame her for my troubles, she had given me information I hadn’t had before. She had told me how the sirens fed and that she could taste her victims’ souls, but maybe that wasn’t the same as keeping it.

She had always wanted more.

And if she couldn’t keep an unwilling soul, maybe Valadern couldn’t either.

Sister Leah had said that demons couldn’t take an unwilling soul, that they couldn’t come where they weren’t invited. Maybe it was true. Lilthe hadn’t been able to follow me into the monastery, and maybe Valadern wouldn’t have been able to either if I hadn’t summoned him.

What if all I had done was take one terrible tragedy and made it worse?

I didn’t want to believe that. I kept walking and splashing onward until I had to take a moment to catch my breath and fix my loose sandal again.

But the splashing continued, even after I stopped.

Someone was here. Or something.

The steps were heavy as if from a large beast. What kind of creatures were down here? How close? I could barely see my own hand.

I stumbled forward and let out a small gasp when I almost fell.

“Who’s there?” The voice was timid and higher than it should be. Not a monster. Not even a wandering soul.

“Erys?”

“Ari?”

I looked down at my feet. His voice had risen from below me—from inside a sharp chasm I might have fallen into. I braced myself on the rocks around me. I didn’t want to be drawn into another trap, but if there was even a chance that this was my brother, I couldn’t ignore him. “Erys, can you come to me?”

“No . . .” More water splashed, and metal clicked together as he moved. “No, sorry, I can’t.”

The metal had to be a chain. He was locked in a pit in the underworld, a pit that would have already been entirely filled with water if not for the angle of the rocks around it. Was that a sorry enough state to be credible?

I shouldn’t have been wishing ill fates on my brother, but after being tricked once before, I wouldn’t believe anything else. Valadern would want Erys to be suffering in some place hard to get to.

His voice came to me again. “What are you doing here, Ari? Are you . . . dead?”

I shook my head. “No. Are you?”

“I . . . I don’t think so.”

My heart thrilled with the news. He wasn’t dead. He was alive. That’s how Valadern made certain his soul would be here and not some other place. By keeping it trapped inside his still living body. That was the answer to all the riddles, the only one that fit.

And I would go to him. Whether he was fake or not, I just had to be near him or any of the lights of my former life again. I examined the rock for a safe way down, but there was so much water, and I couldn’t see. I kept searching with my hands and calling for Erys. “I made a deal with Valadern to come and rescue you. What do you remember?”

A pause followed with more of his labored breathing before he answered me again. “I was on a ship? Helene was seasick again. I was helping her, and then there was a storm. Something dark. I think . . . I think maybe I fell? I don’t know. I woke up here. And there was . . . someone.”

“Naman? Valadern?”

“I don’t know.” And that was all. No other theories.

From the beginning, the way he had been answering me . . . it just wasn’t like him. Too weak. Too few words. My brother could talk and talk

endlessly. But I didn’t think it was a siren trick anymore. Erys wasn’t dead, but he was hurt, and I needed to rescue him.

Another splash sounded in the distance. A snort on the wind like something breathing or perhaps just smelling. Nothing needed to breathe here except me and my brother.

And we might not be breathing much longer if a dark creature attacked us. “Erys, there is something up here.”

“Is it the minotaur again?”

“Minotaur?” Was there supposed to be a minotaur in the underworld?

“I think that’s what it is. They say in the legends that a hero killed it, but we are in the underworld so . . .”

“It’s an undead minotaur?” I reached for my knife, but how was I supposed to fight something that was dead already? I couldn’t.

“I’ve seen him drag souls to other pits, other monsters. You need to hide,” Erys said.

I nodded. “I’m coming down.” Jumping down to him blind really seemed my only option.

“What? No . . .”

I splashed down, bumping against him.

“Great,” he moaned. “Now we’re both stuck.”

“I’m happy to see you too.” Well, sort of see. I still wasn’t seeing much besides a few rough outlines in the dark. I reached out and touched his leg until I found the chain.

His bare foot was shackled, the chain buried in the muddy earth. I drew my knife to dig it out. Erys tried to help, pulling on the chain, but weakly. His ankle was unnaturally warm—likely rubbed raw and red with fever—and he had already exhausted himself.

“They haven’t been feeding you?” But even as I asked the question, I smelt the spoiled fruit floating in the waist-deep water around him.

He was starving in front of a feast.

He coughed. “I . . . I didn’t trust it. I’ve heard stories, and they’ve been asking . . .”

“For you to swear your soul. And you didn’t?” That should have been a relief, but it wasn’t. Erys hadn’t been eating or drinking the whole time he was here. It couldn’t have been more than a day or two for me, but what about him? Near a week?

I couldn’t waste time thinking about that. We had to get back to the surface with whatever time we had left. After finding Erys alive, I couldn’t bear to have him die in front of me.

Another harsh sound from the minotaur spurred me on. I dug and pulled again until the chain came free.

“Here.” The shackle remained locked on his foot, but I held the weight of the chain and helped him lean against my shoulder. “We’re going to get you out of here.”

“How? It’s too steep.”

I looked up at the rocks, but I reached for the cross at my neck instead. “I’m going to make the water rise. I did it before.”

Erys sputtered in response. “That was you? I almost drowned—”

“Because you were chained to the floor. Now you’re not. And I can help you.”

We had no time. Before he could talk me out of it, I pulled out the cross like I had before. Nothing happened. I waved it around and even tapped it against the stone. Nothing.

“It’s not working,” I said.

“Good. I don’t want to drown.”

“Erys, help me think.” I was just the muscle, the huntress. And now that I had successfully hunted Erys down, thinking through our next plan was supposed to be his job.

“Well, I don’t know. I wasn’t there. How did it work before?”

“I held it. Someone tried to grab me—”

“Who?”

I shook my head. It was just a random soul. And there didn’t seem to be anyone here but us and the minotaur. I heard it moan again, like it was calling to me.

And I wanted to answer it.

I was just so tired of crawling in the dark and being afraid. I wouldn’t draw this out. Erys might come up with a clever plan but not fast enough. With or without the cross, it was a monster, and I was going to fight it as I always did.

“I’m going up there. Stand still.” I climbed on my brother’s back while he whined.

I put one leg on the top of the hole.

The dark blur of the minotaur snorted and charged. Why did the creatures always run to me so quickly?

And I had no time. No room to retreat. Water and rocks vibrated together senselessly in my ears.

I ducked my head and held my breath.

The minotaur hit . . . the hole. It bellowed and tripped, sprawling its too-large body over the too-small opening. I smiled like I had planned it that way. At least it had given me the space I needed to ready my knife. This was why I had come. This was what I had been working toward, the fight I thought I would need to have to actually rescue one of my siblings. I had seen men fight bulls in the Solian amphitheater and trained with them. I could do this.

Or at least, I could try.

The creature righted itself to charge again, and I stabbed and ducked to the side. It hit the wall. Something above me cracked. It seemed that even without the cross, I might bring more of the ceiling and water down on us. I *wanted* to bring the ceiling down on us.

I opened my mouth to sing—screaming out the notes.

The minotaur charged as the ceiling caved in.

Water roared over the rocks above us. I darted back to the hole, holding out my hand for Erys. “Come on!”

He coughed, then his fingers brushed mine, once, twice, before I got a good hold of him.

“Hold your breath,” I said. I was a strong swimmer, but even I wasn’t fully prepared for the storm that broke around us.

I kicked. I fought. My sandal fell from my foot, and it took all my strength to keep us afloat as the water rose.

And, when I was finally treading water with my head above the waves, I still had my bag, the dagger, and my brother, but something else was missing. I ran my fingers around my neck again before admitting defeat. “I can’t find the cross.”

Erys blanched. “So . . . the water is just going to keep on rising?”

Most likely. Maybe I really could destroy the underworld. Or at least bury Tartarus in water. Eventually the higher levels would be covered too.

Whatever time we had before, I had just sliced it in half.

But I gritted my teeth and nodded. “Maybe that’s a good thing. The monsters won’t come after us.” I wouldn’t have to fight anything that was

buried in water.

“We can’t swim forever either. Where do we go?”

I doubted Erys could swim for more than a few minutes, and I didn’t have a board or anything to tow him with. I might not have thought through all that very well—or at all, but the ferryman said there were many paths down to Tartarus. It seemed I was still using his advice, even now. I searched for the merest hint of light, hoping to find an opening closer than the stairs down from the palace. “There.”

I grabbed Erys’s arm and swam forward, trying not to think of the missing cross. I had been switching between the cross and the dagger since coming here, but it seemed I already knew which I would leave behind.

CHAPTER 25

When we reached the relative peace of Asphodel's broken city streets, Erys dry heaved, and it took me a moment to realize what the problem was. I had seen so many bones and withered corpses scattered with the rocks and debris that I had become completely numb to them.

But he still hadn't.

"Sorry," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I just . . ."

"It's all right." Perhaps it was an ill omen that I was the only one not to react to the death and sorrow around us. Perhaps I was really the broken one, all along.

Erys steeled himself, looking at some of the larger bones. "Maybe we can use them."

"For what?"

"Well, I don't have a weapon. And a torch would be nice."

What did the boy think he was going to do with either of those things? The middle chamber's increased light revealed how gaunt he was. His sunken-in eyes and thinned-out bones that made the red swelling on his foot more prominent—along with the trailing chain. His tunic so torn and baggy that the sleeves fell to only cover him at the waist.

He couldn't lift anything larger than a pomegranate.

"Just leave it," I said. "We're leaving, and we don't need anyone here mad at us for disrespecting their remains."

My loose sandal was gone. I pulled the other from my foot so I would at least feel balanced again. I would have to walk the rest of the way barefoot, but that didn't seem so terrible anymore with everything else I had suffered

up to this point and what I stood to gain if I succeeded. Erys was alive, and I could save him. I pulled him up and started us walking. I looked for Serena while we went, but the path we had taken out of Tartarus wasn't the same one that led to the palace. We were out in the city streets again, so of course Serena wasn't there, but maybe she would be at the river Styx.

If she wasn't . . . I peered down at Erys.

He limped, forcing me to support most of his weight along with the chain.

Maybe I shouldn't wait for Serena at all. I wanted to, but her boy was already certainly dead. Erys was alive, and I was going to keep him that way. Just getting him to the shore of the river Styx might be more than his body could give. I would just have to hope Serena would already be there waiting for me, and that she would have the wood from Elysium to fix the ferryman's ship—she might have even conned the ferryman himself into helping us again.

I took a step into the dim caverns of Asphodel, suddenly unsure of the direction.

"What's wrong?" Erys's words were a croak.

My cheeks flushed, but with how much he was struggling, I didn't want to waste any time being evasive. I had to answer him. "I . . . I was so focused on finding you, I really didn't keep track of the turns. I'm not sure where to go."

"How did you find me?"

My cheeks grew hotter. If I thought the soul connection was ridiculous magic, Erys would think it ten times worse. "Because . . . because you're my brother, and I love you. If you share a strong bond with someone, it's supposed to lead you to them."

He just looked at me then. That's how I knew for certain it was Erys and not another siren trick. Even when he was dying, that boy still could make me feel stupid in a single glance. "And is there anyone on the surface that you love?"

I had my answer in two beats of my heart, two beats too long. Even though I never said it out loud before, I knew who I loved and who I would be most sorry to lose if we couldn't make it home again. "Jonas," I said. "I can think of him."

Erys nodded. "Just don't start drooling on my shoulder, all right?" He settled back on my shoulder and smirked at me again, but he didn't

understand. He wouldn’t. He always demanded I say I loved him, to show all the affection that he deemed appropriate for the familiar relationship he had prescribed for us. Jonas didn’t make such demands. He followed. He waited.

Our love was something I had to discover myself, and marvel at the glory of it.

But Jonas had often been my tether no matter where I wandered or how dark the chaos around me, a steady anchor that made me feel safe and grounded again. Not as flamboyant or scalding as a sun, not something foreign or completely opposite of myself, but something that could sit in the sky beside me.

A guiding star that could lead me home.

CHAPTER 26

At first, it was hard to think of Jonas with Erys literally weighing me down with every step. But then, that was always how our relationship had been. Even when I had accepted that Erys would never be what I wanted, even when I realized that I only thought I wanted him because of how love-starved and lonely I had been before him, and that I truly needed him to be my first male friend and the start of my human family, he still consumed me.

Erys was the sun to my moon. So many of my decisions were made to please or spite him.

Erys wanted me with Jonas. He picked him for me before I was ready, before I thought it was possible to love anyone else. I didn't want Erys to be right after the pain he had caused, to think he knew me better than I knew myself.

And maybe I was still a little afraid to be rejected again or worse yet, to *not* be rejected.

My mother killed every man she bedded; the world of true lovers was so foreign to me. Just having a brother or a friend was really all I thought I could handle.

So I held off and made myself miserable for it. I knew Jonas was the kindest man there ever was. I knew I would never find anyone better for me. It might not be the dramatic, all-consuming love I once felt for Erys, but that wasn't what I wanted anymore. I didn't want the chaos or unpredictability, the constant checking of my every thought and motion. To see every woman around me as a threat, never knowing if we were about to fly or tumble off a cliff.

A softer love, a safer one.

I might not have Jonas on my mind all the time, but every time I did, I smiled. And when we were together, it seemed I could read into his hands, his eyes, his very soul and feel like I belonged there. Nothing was hidden. Nothing could be hidden. Jonas knew every secret I tried to conceal. He knew what it was to be forced to live apart from the world, to guard his heart from those who never tried to understand him, but he had given it all to me before I even knew to ask for it.

He saw me as better than I saw myself. He loved me before I knew I loved him. And anyone off the street could see he was far more attractive than some stupid prince.

Anyone off the street . . . Why did I leave Jonas with the twins? Both would try for him. Maybe even as a pair. I had been so secure when I left, but that seemed so long ago. Maybe I had been too secure, taking it all for granted. He hadn't wanted me to go. He asked me to stay, and I hadn't. Another "fight" I hadn't recognized until it was over.

But that wasn't true either.

I knew Jonas. I knew he withdrew when another man might rage. I had never wanted a raging man after all the stories my mother told, but that didn't mean his feelings didn't deserve the same notice. It just never occurred to me that I wouldn't get a chance to fix it.

I had been too wrapped up in Erys and the rest of my unstable family again.

Why should Jonas have to put up with that? Not just the last few days, but a full year of me thinking only of myself and what I wanted to fix? What if I finally pushed him too far? What if I got back home, only to find that he had already changed his mind? Despite everything Erys and everyone around us assumed, we never kissed. I never told him I loved him.

What if I didn't get back, and he never knew?

Bringing home the prince of our empire still might be a worthy goal, if I succeeded, but I needed to go home. I needed to go now. Then I could leave my troublesome brother and sisters to their fates and answer the unspoken question between us.

I would have Jonas's hand, arms, and anything else he wanted to give me.

The mud of the riverbank squished between my toes, and water rushed in my ears before I realized we had reached the shore. But it wasn't right.

We had barely passed the outer walls of the cavernous city, and it was too soon. And the water . . . There was more of it somehow.

My fault. I nearly collapsed under Erys and had to push him off as those words settled into me with a sudden horror. I knew what had happened: All the storms and water I had summoned had risen up from Tartarus to settle here. The river had risen over the bank and all the way to the edge of Asphodel. It had drowned out the dais where the old judges had stood and carried away the boat from where it had been beached on the shore.

The boat was probably on the bottom of the river since we never had the chance to repair it.

All my former doubts resurfaced into a wave of panic. Serena wasn't here. Neither was the ferryman. And even if he were, why would he help us now?

Valadern had said I needed to carry Erys's soul out of the underworld, but I couldn't.

I couldn't get home. I couldn't get Erys across a river this vast, and he wasn't even talking to me anymore. He had stumbled to the ground the moment I had stopped supporting him. His bare chest rose and fell in shaky, shallow breaths, but for how much longer? I wasn't any kind of a healer, but I knew enough to know that we couldn't just sit here waiting any more than I could pull him around searching for another solution. He would die without help.

And if he was really dying . . . If there was no other choice . . . I stared at the river, then reached for my bag. All the old stories spoke of eating the pomegranate being dangerous, but avoiding drinking the water had always been an extra safeguard, one we didn't have the luxury of heeding anymore.

If he was going to die of thirst anyway, then I had to at least try.

I dug through my sack for my empty waterskin, filled it in the river, and pressed it against his face. "Erys, drink this."

He blinked; his eyes unfocused. His voice cracked. "Where . . . where are we?"

I did not want to answer him. "It's fine. Just drink this. Please."

That made him suspicious. He pursed his lips and wouldn't drink. I should have lied and said we were home. Too late now. He had figured out where we were, and then he gave me that look, the one I had seen once before—when I had tried to kiss him. He was going to say no, even though he loved me, even though it broke his heart to disappoint me. He still was

going to say no. But unlike before, I was stronger than he was. I could make him drink.

One drink now might not save him, but it could be enough to trap his soul here in limbo. Or even if he just *thought* that it would . . . I couldn't do that to him. Not after all he had done to resist the food Valadern had offered.

But I couldn't just sit here and watch him die either.

I dropped the waterskin in defeat. "I don't know what to do."

Erys closed his eyes and grimaced, but maybe it was supposed to be a smile. "That's fine. That's why you have me." He took another moment to catch his breath. Sweat dotted his forehead despite the chill. "You said . . . you said you made a deal with Valadern to come here. What was it?"

"I . . . I had to find you and bring you out of the underworld, but I don't know if I can."

"And if you couldn't?"

I shook my head. "I said I would make myself a siren. But I won't. I only said I would so I could find you. And you . . . you were supposed to be dead already."

"And that would work? If you had my heart, but you weren't the one to actually kill me?"

I shrugged. How was I supposed to know how it all worked?

Erys nodded. "And if it worked, if you were a siren, I might be gone, but you could swim through the water and make it home. You could swim anywhere."

Perhaps, but why did it matter? I wasn't a siren, and we both were going to die here.

I would never see Jonas or anyone else on the surface again.

Erys squeezed his eyes closed, and I wondered if I lost him again before he spoke. "I . . . I have an idea," he said. "Give me the knife."

I pulled it from my belt and gave it to him at once, but no new thoughts occurred to me. What could he do with a knife that I couldn't? "Now what?"

Erys looked at the blade for a moment, hesitating before his grip went firm. "Close your eyes."

"Why?"

"Because it's my plan, and I said so. Close your eyes."

"Fine." I shut my eyes, but then I stuck out my tongue at him.

He laughed. “I love you too, you goat.”

And that’s when I knew. The wind broke around his arm, and I opened my eyes just as he plunged the knife into his chest.

He collapsed, leaving the glowing blue blade stained with blood.

CHAPTER 27

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. "Erys . . ." I pulled the knife from him, desperate to somehow stop the bleeding, but his chest was already still and lifeless under my hand. Even cold.

How could he be so cold already?

"No. No, Erys, please . . ." The words dried up, meaningless in my ears.

I knew he was gone. I knew I couldn't save him, that I never could. I felt myself breaking. I collapsed and cried over him in a way I wasn't able to when I first heard of his death, and even when the dust stirred behind me, I didn't turn.

I just yelled. "Why? Why did you do that?"

"You gave me the knife."

I glared at the disembodied soul hovering beside me that should have been my brother. "I didn't mean for you to stab yourself with it!"

Erys shrugged. I could see through the soft light of his transparent torso to the stone wall behind him. "What else was I going to do? You wouldn't do it. But you made a bargain with a god you were never going to win. He wasn't going to let both of us out of here alive."

"So, you just killed yourself?" How did that make sense?

"Yes, I killed myself. So you can take my heart and live." He pointed down to the chained and bloody corpse beneath us. "And yes, I much prefer that than both of us dying of thirst in front of a river—trust me, it isn't fun!"

"I wanted to save you!"

His sandals didn't quite touch the ground, and he rose in the air as he yelled, making himself taller than me for once. "Well, maybe I didn't want

to be saved! Did you honestly think I wanted you to come down here to *him* after all I did to help you leave your rotten family in the first place?”

I shook my head, disbelieving. All I had been working toward was crashing around me, the goal that might have made everything worth it and justified my actions to everyone I left behind. To the boy I left behind. “Jonas said you wouldn’t want this, but I—I couldn’t . . . I—”

“Why, Ari? Why? You could have married Jonas. Been princess. You could have been happy a million different ways. Why do you have to keep chasing after me and trying to fix people who don’t want to be fixed?”

“Because . . .” I breathed as fresh tears ran down my face. The boy was relentless, even in death. “Because I can’t be a princess! I can’t marry Jonas or do anything else because I am a daughter of a demon, and no matter what I do, I’ll end up the same way she did.” I gestured at the bloody carnage in front of me. Somehow, I had the death she always planned for me.

I could never be good enough for the life Erys and Jonas wanted to give me, but I thought that if I could fix my dark past, fix my family, that maybe I could leave it behind. That I could earn my redemption by saving everyone else. Anyone else. And I couldn’t even do that.

If Erys had to die to save me, then perhaps I didn’t want to be saved, either. In all his plots and endless scheming, didn’t the stupid boy ever think of that?

Erys reached for me then, but I only chilled as his hand passed right through me. “Oh, Ari, I’m sorry,” he said, instantly softening, but I didn’t want to hear it.

“You’re sorry? I was supposed to save you.”

“You did.”

“For a year.”

He nodded. “And it was a good year. Maybe it was enough for me to finish everything I had to do.”

“Finish? You’re seventeen!”

“I was always advanced for my age.” He smiled at his small attempt at humor, but I wouldn’t. “Hey. It’s all right,” he said. “You know I would stay with you forever if I could. But you should also know . . . Even before I met you, I was the only heir of Solis, and people have been trying to use me or kill me my whole life. If it had to end this way . . . it just seemed like the only way to really beat them was to do it myself. If you didn’t take my heart, but I gave it to you.”

He made himself a sacrifice. A true and willing one.

“It’s all right,” he said again. “I’m fine. I’ll stay with you until you find your sister, and we’ll get you home. Then you’ll destroy the heart and be human again, same as your sisters.”

I shook my head. “You’re going to help get me home?”

“Sure. Believe it or not, I actually feel a lot better now than I did before. I think I look better now too.” He poked at his old face like he had poked at the bones and said they could be used for something.

“Don’t touch that!”

“Why not? It’s my corpse, and I don’t care.”

“Just don’t . . . don’t make this harder.” I trembled, looking at the discarded knife despite all the absurdity of having my brother’s spirit there to provide his own commentary. I wanted to spend another day and night, another thousand years raging about how I didn’t want this terrible sacrifice Erys had forced into my lap, but I had no will left to refuse him.

I was still so tired, and I still wanted to go home. Perhaps a part of me already knew that I would fail in this dark quest and come home with nothing else accomplished, but I had to keep kicking and fighting until I saw the corpse in front of me.

And now, it truly was over. Nothing left to fight. I would hate it until the day I died, but I had found my brother and discovered the truth about myself at last: I wasn’t a hero, and I couldn’t hope to save anyone—not anymore.

Not without the help of the gift Erys wanted to give me.

And if he was already dead and impossible to save, then I couldn’t just waste it, could I?

I thought of Serena, how she had been trapped by our mother and forced to kill Aides. She had felt that becoming a soulless demon might be a relief. Erys’s sacrifice might have been more selflessly motivated than our mother’s actions, but I still felt myself trapped and overcome with the same dark longing for a complete escape from my own soul.

But unlike Serena, I knew how to reverse the process of becoming a siren and wouldn’t have to stay one long. Just long enough to escape and bring Serena with me. Then I would do what Erys said and destroy the heart to retake my human form on the surface. I could break ties with the underworld’s dark god and never tempt fate again.

I wiped my stinging eyes and gripped the knife hilt.

Erys finally paused, becoming more sober. “You still have to get my heart out, don’t you? And you’re probably going to cry the whole time, right?”

I shrugged helplessly.

Erys let out a long sigh. “Fine. If you have to. I’ll be up there if you need me. I think I can fly!” He tried, and soon his unfettered soul was up floating by the cavern ceiling, leaving me alone in the darkness again.

CHAPTER 28

Even after Erys's spirit left me alone, I didn't move for a long time. Lost souls moaned in the distance. Water moved against the rocks, but the haunted melody couldn't spur me to action. The body still looked too much like Erys, just bloodless and pale.

If I was going to do this, he couldn't be Erys.

He had to be an empty corpse.

I covered his face with my sack and made the first cut, widening the killing blow to dig past the ribs and uncover the heart. I didn't know what to do after that, after I had the red muscle in my hand, but I was certain there was someone here who would be glad to help me.

I thought I might need to make an altar, but this whole place was supposed to be his realm, so I plunged forward without one. "I summon Neptune, Poseidon, God of the Sea. King of the Depths, Valadern, I call to thee."

The words echoed through the cavern. And again, I waited for something to mark Valadern's entrance. But my breath caught, and my hand trembled when something actually did.

In the underworld, Valadern appeared in front of me like one of his stone statues brought to life. Just as they were, he was a head taller than a man, the muscles of his torso defined and chiseled as stone. His forked trident gleamed without the sun to shine down on it, and his long hair and beard moved around him in an artificial breeze.

His voice was the same, piercing me to my bones. "Daughter. Are you finally ready to do as I asked?"

I swallowed and tried to make myself firm. I had surrendered to this last desperate plan, but I still had to make sure it was done correctly. “Will you do as you promised? Make me a siren?”

He laughed. “Of course. I always do exactly as I promise.” His stone-black eyes flitted away to something behind me. “And what of you, young prince? You swore to me moments ago that I would never have your soul.”

Erys’s spirit crossed his arms. “You still won’t.”

I shook my head. I would not let Erys’s spirit be damned along with everything else I had done to him. This curse should fall to me alone. “You don’t need him to swear to you for me to be a siren,” I said, and I was sure it was true.

My sisters and mother had all used unwilling victims.

But Valadern continued to stare past me to my brother. “Perhaps not, but I would still rather like to hear him say it.” Mockery entered his tone. “You want me to share my power with your ‘sister,’ don’t you?”

My breath caught, but there was no need. Erys had always been far more clever than me, and he knew what danger his words could bring. He wouldn’t give Valadern an opening to take more than we had already agreed to.

“I gave my heart to Ari,” he said. “You can use my body to help her, nothing else.”

Valadern stared for another moment, but then he nodded. “Good enough. The bond will hold.” He dipped his fingers in Erys’s blood and beckoned me forward. “Now, daughter, let us begin.”

Valadern led, and I followed like a sick sort of dance. I cut into my brother without looking and chanted words without listening to what I said. Then the words faded, and the ceremony ended almost without my notice. I had expected I would feel something different as a siren, but I didn’t.

My brother’s blood streaked and burned into my skin, creating the dark tattoos and making me a little nauseated, but that was all.

I came to my feet. “So, I can leave? I can go home?”

That would be the only good thing out of a line of terrible, if I could go home again and bring my sister with me.

“Go home?” Valadern asked with mock confusion. He looked from the heart still in my hand to the ceiling of the cavern above us. “So, you can break the bond you just forged? I think not. I hope you have not found us inhospitable, because I think I will keep you down there a bit longer.”

With that, thunder shook the stone, and the dark walls shifted. The river water rose up over Erys’s body, washing the stains of the sacrificial ceremony away. The surface tunnels beyond the river collapsed, sealing the exits, before I recognized the new acuity of my night vision.

All my emerging powers only let me see and feel how hopeless it was as the underworld reshaped itself into a cage of water and stone.

And Valadern faded away.

CHAPTER 29

I screamed my frustration to the far reaches of the cavern, shaking the whole underworld with the storms of my wrath. It just didn't make sense. Though it had ruined my plans, I saw no reason for Valadern to willingly give me access to his power, only to lock me down here again.

I had already been locked down here to start with!

So I just sat there cursing Valadern until I ran out of breath.

Erys floated back down to me when I was done. "Feel better yet?"

"No. Should I? Did you find a way out?"

"No. Turns out, I can float through anything but the ceiling." He pointed to the dome cavern above us.

I ran a hand over my face, trying to think. There was nothing left to do but think. "He still wanted you to swear to him though. So, if you had died before coming here, you would have gone somewhere else. And the other men my mother and sisters killed, their souls could be anywhere. They could even be in the nuns' heaven." I looked upward.

"That's where I would go. If I weren't having fun being here with you, that is." He floated above me lazily.

I watched his glowing and transparent form float for another moment before it clicked.

"The cross. When I touched the other soul with it . . . I saw her spirit. She looked like you, and then she faded. Completely. Maybe . . . Maybe I was sending her somewhere else? Maybe that's why the old souls came after me. I thought they were attacking, but Serena kept saying they needed help, and maybe they did." Maybe I was wrong about everything. Maybe I should have tried to understand and love them where they were, instead of

merely trying to save them. That was what Sister Leah had told me to do all along to defeat Valadern. “But I lost the cross.”

Erys flew ahead of me, perching himself on the wall and pointing more eagerly at the city. “You lost it underwater. I bet you could find it again with your new fins.”

I looked down at my legs. Erys might enjoy flying, but I wasn’t quite so eager to get in the water and have those appear. “But I’m a demon. Won’t the cross burn me or something?”

Erys laughed. “There is no way you’re evil enough for that. I’ll vouch for you anyway.” He shrugged and scrunched his face again. “Really, your ritual shouldn’t have worked at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Weren’t you listening to your own demonic ritual? It’s the sacrifice that makes you eligible for the power, the damning of your own soul. It’s got nothing to do with me. But you didn’t kill me. You didn’t do anything to damage your soul.”

“Just because I didn’t kill you doesn’t mean my soul is perfect, and I did swear to him.” I had already been doomed before any of this started.

“You swore to merge your power with his. You’re leaching power off him, and he’s doing the same with you.”

I nodded. So Valadern *did* have a reason for wanting me to swear to him after all. “The ferryman said Valadern would want my power, and now he has it.” Curse that stupid ferryman for being right. Now all I could picture was lightning storms rolling in to overtake the world above.

Were Jonas and the twins still safe at the monastery?

They had better be. I had thought I needed to fix everyone around me, but the only thing I needed to be happy was to regain what I had before, to see Jonas and the real sun again.

“For now,” Erys said. “He’s only in charge because he had the most power going in, but maybe you could shift the balance and change that.”

“How?”

“By using that cross to free all the rest of the souls he controls. By destroying this place. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

It was what Serena wanted. I didn’t know if I shared the same hope or any hope at all anymore, but it wasn’t like I had anything else to do.

I put Erys’s heart in my bag and stood. “I guess we can try it.”

We could take the whole underworld down, and Valadern certainly deserved it.

CHAPTER 30

With Erys floating above me, I ran through the streets of Asphodel. I found many long puddles and searched through the murky water until I saw the flooded stairway down to Tartarus.

I put my foot on the first stair, but Erys flinched back when he tried to follow.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It just feels . . . weird." He rose in the air to show his distaste. "Like the water is inside of me. I can go through it, but I don't like it. I'm afraid it'll weigh me down, and I'll never get out again." He seemed a little embarrassed—he was dead and still afraid.

Erys wasn't one for irrational fears or irrational anything, but countless souls and corpses were trapped in the river Styx, so it could be a risk. And even if it wasn't, there was no point in pressing him into it and making him suffer any more.

I was a siren. I shouldn't need his or anyone's help underwater.

So I threw him my sack instead, keeping only the clothes on my back. "Then stay up here and guard your heart." I had even given him the knife inside the sack. The cursed blade had been attached to me like another limb all through the past year, but I had no more desire to use it now.

He raised an eyebrow at me. The sack had fallen right through his transparent form to settle on the earthen street under him. He wouldn't be able to carry it—let alone guard it.

"Well, just hover over it, then. Moan and haunt and do ghost things if anything tries to come near it." Really, I didn't think anything would try to

take it; I just didn’t want to lose it underwater while I became a siren. I really didn’t know what would happen to me then.

Even leaving the heart with a transparent ghost seemed like a better option.

“And maybe you can figure out which way Serena went? If you hover around a little bit?” I asked. If this worked, then we would have to search for her next.

Erys finally floated up toward the ceiling. “Fine. I’ll see what I can do.”

One problem had been taken care of. Now on to the next.

I went farther down the steps, plunging myself deeper and deeper into the water. It rose to my ankles and then to my waist. My neck. Something inside me wanted to panic, but I opened my mouth and tried to welcome it instead.

Water filled my lungs. My legs came together. A sudden feeling of ice shocked my core, then faded to complete numbness as my tan skin became a transparent blue with visible veins.

I was a siren.

A rush of new freedom came to me, like instead of sinking down to Tartarus, I had emerged on Elysium Fields, where everything seemed light and peaceful. Like I could control it all. Even the sodden bundles of my stola seemed much too constricting as I hovered on the threshold of my rising power, but I resisted the urge to break free.

My sisters and my mother had hardly ever worn clothing, even on land, but I didn’t want to return to the surface naked. Ghost or not, Erys would see me, and that thought seemed to steady me like another soul connection. I had to return to him and Serena, but I had to find the cross first. I wasn’t sure what to do, but I cried out again on instinct, and a series of images came to me at once. More than images. Instead of sending out love and being drawn to just one location, I could feel and somehow see everything the water touched.

The cross lay at the bottom of another dark pit. I found it almost at once, but there was more than that. Every creature that had been trapped below had now risen with the rising water. Not everything could swim that well, but nothing needed to breathe.

The minotaur and an army of other monstrous creatures of Tartarus blocked my way.

I tried swimming one way and then another. My tail was strong. The water responded to my every slight movement. But sirens could still die from mortal wounds, and no matter how many new powers I had, there didn't seem to be a way to swim past all those dark creatures without notice.

I could see them all with a perfect clarity. Their scales and fangs and rippling muscles. Dragons and sea serpents. Hydras and even the legendary Charybdis. They would serve Valadern, but would they serve me?

I seriously doubted it.

But I had to do this. I was the only one who could.

The minotaur—as a land beast—might be the one I should try for, the one who would be the slowest and most ungainly in the water if I tried to swim past him. And though I knew I wasn't much for strategy, that one thought led to another. It was like I still had my brother's voice in my head, spurring me onward. *"All right, Ari, what do you know about the minotaur?"*

It was a beast. A mindless beast that was going to kill me.

I didn't have the knife, so I would have to summon all my new siren weapons to make it stop.

My pretend brother sighed at me. *"But if it's undead, how will your knife help? Drowning it didn't help. We came down here to get the cross and free the lost souls."*

That last bit actually sounded more like Serena. She wanted to save all the lost souls, even the unpleasant ones. But it was a minotaur. Did it have a soul?

Sirens did not just send out energy. They took it. I felt for the minotaur and saw flashes of other faces. Desires and even memories. A mindless rage. A betrayal and a curse that stole him away from a blurry face. A woman's face.

The minotaur had a human mother. It had a soul.

I remembered the siren who attacked me and knew I could appear as the woman this monster—the poor and wretched soul—still longed for.

I opened my mouth. "I am going to help you," I said, the words clear, even underwater.

Then I sang.

The beast swung his arm once, twice, and then went limp in the water. The blurry images in my head became clearer. More of him seemed drawn

into me and me into him. More of his joy, sorrow, and everything in between. I might have felt pity or sympathy at first, embracing him as another cursed soul to be saved, but the feeling grew and morphed into something else. It was a feeling I hadn't really known before, but it was almost like the ravenous hunger I had felt in my human form, coming to life again.

The memories were sweet, and the soul should be mine, for however long I could keep it. Something that could warm me up and finally chase away all the darkness.

Sharp fangs appeared in my mouth, cutting into my gums. I sang, and I salivated. I sang, and I turned from my former path. I sang, and I didn't want the cross anymore.

I wanted to feed.

Even an undead creature seemed to have more life than I did. I would take it as my own.

Then my tail burned—starting with the finned tip and traveling up my spine. I had been in the pit already and so close to the cross, I had hit it with the tip of my fin as I had turned.

It seemed I was "evil" enough now for it to burn me, but I was glad. It had merely jerked me back to reason again.

I didn't want to feed on anything, to make my own monster stronger. It was sure to overtake me completely if I let it.

I thought of Erys, Jonas, Serena, and anyone else still counting on me to return. I thought of all the desperate souls I now wanted to save. I snatched up the burning cross in my free hand and came to the beast I had enthralled. "I am going to help you," I said with more certainty.

A flash of a human man's spirit formed before the beast's corpse crumbled to the ground, and the water rose again.

When I surfaced, Erys floated down from the cavernous ceiling over Asphodel. "Did you get the cross?"

I nodded and showed it to him, now resting on my neck and no longer burning. It had settled down when I was no longer using my siren powers. I

wrung through the dripping folds of my stola, relieved to see my tanned legs again. “Did you figure out where Serena went?”

He pointed back toward the palace, and I wasn’t at all surprised. That was where we had left the ferryman. That’s where she would want to go. I grabbed my bag, preparing for what should have been another long trek, but I wasn’t as tired as I used to be, and I had found a new way to make myself busy. I used the cross and freed any soul we passed. I watched light after light float away, dropping their withered corpses behind and sending out a soft rumble through the underworld that could show that it was weakening.

This would work. If anything, it seemed too easy.

I still was miserable. My sisters hated to come to the surface as sirens, and now I shared their loathing. After feeling so much as a siren, stepping up onto shore and having my sense of the water blinded was like locking myself in chains. And, since the water had also risen in Asphodel, I found myself looking longingly at every puddle and sewer grate I passed.

But when I came to the palace, the doors stood open for me. The halls were empty in an ominous way—without any more souls to free. I kept the cross in my hand and pressed forward to the banquet hall with Erys floating behind me. Just like before, the tables were lined with food, and a skeleton sat in the emperor’s chair.

But now, Serena cried in front of it.

My footsteps carried out to her. “Serena!”

She turned. “Ari?”

“There you are. Are you all right?”

“I was looking for Aides, but I found . . .”

I blanched at the skeleton, seeing it in a new light. “That’s Aides?”

“It’s his body but not his spirit.”

Erys and I exchanged a look, but for once, the boy said nothing. This was my sister, not his. She needed me to tell her the truth. I touched her shoulder, trying to break it to her gently. “He might not be here, Serena. Erys and I, we found out—”

“He’s here,” Serena said. “And he can control all the rest of them.”

I turned to see all the walking souls coming in to surround us—all the undead slaves who had been missing from the long hallways. The unhooded ferryman stood in front of them.

“What?” I asked, still not understanding.

“He’s not just a ferryman. He’s Aides. And he’s a god.”

CHAPTER 31

A god? I blinked at the pale and ageless young man for another few moments before the pieces came together. “You’re Hades?”

The ferryman nodded. “Yes, but my name is also Aides—Aidoneus the unseen, Pluto the rich, Orcus the killer, and many others. But Aides will always be my favorite. Or at least it was until I met a harpy.”

Serena still sobbed, staying on her knees behind me. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

I shook my head. “But if you’re Hades, then you’re married to Persephone.”

“And I still love her,” Aides said. “But she was one of the first to fade, so many years ago. The world is changing. They worship the One God and are forgetting us. All the minor gods and goddesses. The nymphs, the river gods, the satyrs, they’re all gone. And the natural and elemental spirits don’t have souls and leave nothing behind when they go. Only the very strongest are still truly worshiped and are able to survive. But even the ones who are left prefer to take a mortal life instead of continuing their diminished existence. Some even believe that they could serve the new god and claim their own redemption, their own eternal soul.”

“You took a mortal life?” I looked back at Aides’s dried bones.

“The mortal was already dead, and as I said, all gods have the power to join bodies and spirits together. Even before all this, Zeus often joined his spirit with his mortal subjects to use his powers in the mortal world and create his bastard heroes with mortal women. Hercules and all the rest. And there are so many claimed by the sea. I took a mortal’s body after his death—Poseidon gave it to me.”

“Why would he do that?”

“To take my power. That was our deal. Poseidon became Valadern, the god over the sea, the underworld—all the depths. In exchange, he agreed to let me come to one of his daughters who prayed to me and try to live my mortal life with her.” He looked back at Serena.

“So, that’s why you appeared when she prayed for Hades? You wanted to take her off the island?”

He nodded. “But if I was going to live as a proper human and gain my own soul, I couldn’t just take her like I did with Persephone. It had to be her choice. I came to her. I talked to her, told her everything I could to get her to trust and come with me, but she wouldn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” Serena said again. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Aides merely sneered at her. “I thought she loved me, in the true way the mortals do, but she killed me.”

“She really didn’t kill you,” I said. He obviously was still moving around quite a bit for a corpse.

“I was mortal. She killed me. Now I am no longer the God of the Underworld, but one of its lost and fading relics. One that your cross could never touch.”

I supposed that was true. I couldn’t send him to a mortal heaven if he wasn’t a mortal spirit. But that wasn’t fair. Serena had been forced to kill Aides, by our mother and Valadern. “You know he cheated.”

Aides shrugged. “I always assumed so. Gods always cheat.”

“Weren’t you a god?”

“I wasn’t that kind of god. The girl was right. I never cheat. I’m the only one who doesn’t. Just because I’m not as nice to think about, people always assume the worst. But we were never really devils. Or at least we didn’t start out that way. I was death. Poseidon was the sea. Natural, neutral spirits created by the humans to explain the workings of their mortal Earth. But as he felt his power fading to the One God, Valadern could not accept it. He reached for other powers I would never take myself.”

“So, you’re a good god? You helped us. You’ll let us go.”

He shook his head. “I’m afraid not. You were right after all. Now that Valadern has taken my power, I have to do as he commands. He has his own distractions in the mortal world, but he asked all of his creatures to make certain you remained behind. I must obey, and we will all be doomed here forever.”

Death was a complete downer.

But far from simply being melodramatic, Aides gave a signal, and my brother’s spirit was ripped away from me.

CHAPTER 32

My brother was in the hands of a devil.

"Erys!" I cried, but there was nothing I could do. His expression was as blank as the others. I should have realized something was wrong the moment Aides came in. Letting me talk to Serena on my own was one thing, but my loud-mouth brother had been quiet for far too long. It was unnatural, and I should have used the cross to free his spirit before coming here.

Aides hung his head. "I'm sorry about this. I didn't think I would be, but I am. I even hoped that you might get yourselves killed without my interference."

"That's why you left us." But that didn't matter anymore. I had to get Erys back. And if the cross wouldn't work on Aides, I would sing. I would call to the wind, the rain, and the rest of the storms and even risk reigniting the siren magic I had used in Tartarus.

My knife was still buried in my sack with the heart it had stolen, but I summoned the wind and even shards of ice to throw back the souls around us.

It made the cross burn like fire on my neck, but I wouldn't heed it.

Serena reached out her hand. "Ari, no. It isn't their fault. We need to help them. I need to fix this."

I stopped singing, but my voice dripped with scorn. "And how are you going to do that?"

"It's Aides. Just let me talk to him. Please." Her eyes brimmed with tears that finally tore through to what remained of my human heart.

I had thought I had been protecting her by pushing Aides away, but that wasn't right. She loved him. Her soul would never mend, and I would never save her if I didn't let her try.

I called back my magic, though it took all my strength to do so.

And once I stopped fighting, the other spirits did too.

Serena approached Aides, alone and without fear. She passed the other spirits like they were nothing more than empty sentinel statues. "Before," she said. "You said you never kissed Titera. And when she attacked, you cried my name. That's because when you saw her, when she spelled you, you thought she was me. You thought I was attacking you, the whole time."

"Yes." He nodded, turning away, flinching. "But I don't doubt your version, now that I've heard it. Sirens can play tricks on their victims. I've always known that . . . It's just different—knowing is one thing, but having to experience the mortal weaknesses and pain yourself . . ."

"You cried for me." She gathered her arms together near her heart. "And I wanted so much to help you. I was a young human girl, and I couldn't fight my mother, but I thought that if I released you from your tortured body, your spirit at least would be free. But you were trapped down here instead. You've had to serve Valadern this whole time after watching me betray you. So, I would understand if you didn't want to risk coming to me again, but if you could . . . I still love you, Aides. I always have. And even if you can't love me anymore, I still want to help you."

She opened her hand, showing that she held the pomegranate. She must have taken another one in Elysium. But like Aides had said, I had gotten the story wrong.

Persephone wanted to stay with Hades, and so did Serena.

She turned back to me. "If I eat this, if I stay here with him, then he has his mortal love and has won his bet. He will be a mortal soul and no longer under Valadern's control."

"Yes, I think that might work," I said.

"But will you be all right? If I leave you and the twins?"

That was the only thing she had been waiting for? My approval? But then the terrible truth hit me. Though it had been unintentional, I had caused a part of this pain. As a young child, I had begged Serena to stay with me. She would have never abandoned me and left the island with Aides no matter what he offered her, and that was why they had been forced apart for so long. And even more recently, I had been so opposed to everything she

had been trying to do in the underworld that I had become the disapproving mother in our version of the Persephone story.

But she wanted to help all the dead souls, and even if it broke my heart to see her go, I wouldn't stand in her way anymore. I wanted her to have her peace, more than I wanted her at my side. More than I wanted to save her.

I dropped my hands and released the shards of ice I had summoned, reaching for the cross instead, welcoming the sting. I couldn't fix my sister like I had wanted, but I could love and trust her instead.

I would love her until the end of my days.

"We'll be fine," I said. "Go and help Aides."

She nodded, holding out the fruit again before breaking it open. She swallowed as much of the seeds and juice as she could before throwing down the remains. She reached for Aides. "Come to me, my love, and we will both be whole."

CHAPTER 33

The whole palace shook, like freeing another soul. A hundred souls. The table cracked, and the pottery hit the marble. Fissure lines ran up the stone. I covered my head with my hands as everything settled. For a moment, Aides floated upward like Erys. Then he flew into the bones on the chair, joining with them in a flash of light.

And when all the motion stopped, and light faded, he was Aides. A flesh and blood version of himself. He reached for Serena, and she came to rest in his arms, crying with relief. He sucked his own portion of the juice from her lips, regaining his position along with his queen over what remained of the underworld, if not a mortal human soul.

And then Serena changed as well, the dark tattoos built of blood and sorrow melting off her skin like they had never been.

A mix of emotions filled me at the sight. Joy. Sorrow. Everything in between. The heights and depths of a truly human soul.

I didn't want to rush them or invade their privacy, but as the moments passed, I tentatively regarded the other spirits. Erys had drifted back to my side, though he still seemed too quiet to me. "Did it work?" I asked.

"I . . . I think so," Erys said, though he still seemed lost.

"Oh, it worked," Aides said, seated in the couch and an arm around my sister's shoulders like it had always belonged there. "But did you really think you could destroy the underworld without calling Valadern?"

"He's coming." I knew he was coming. I could *feel* him coming.

"And you'll remember what I said?" Aides asked.

"About Persephone?"

“About Zeus. There is a reason Valadern wants you, and you should find out what that is. There are other gods in play here besides just him and me.”

I nodded. If gods took the bodies of dead men who swore to them, then I might not know where to find Zeus, but I already suspected who one of the other mortal gods might be. “I will. But you should go. You should all go . . .” I froze when I saw Erys and realized what had caused his change of mood more than anything that had happened with Serena and Aides.

This would be the end for him too.

“Hey. It’s fine,” Erys said, with an artificial show of strength. “You’ll be just fine without me. And you can tell my father—well, I don’t know what you should tell my father. He’s going to be ticked no matter what. But Helene . . .”

Helene? She might be on the side of the Cypari now. Or always was. I did not want to tell that girl one single thing, but Erys was my brother, my dead brother, and I still couldn’t refuse him. If this was what he wanted, I would try my best to want it too.

“What would you like me to tell Helene?”

He stood silent for another moment, thinking. “That I’m sorry, I guess. I loved . . . I wanted to love . . . I was committed to her,” he finally decided. “I would have cared for her—always. We were so different, but I wanted to love her. I did. I just wish . . . I wanted to spend more time together and grow to love her more.”

I frowned. I didn’t know what I had been expecting, but that wasn’t it. “That’s it? You wanted to grow to love her? You didn’t already?”

He laughed. “Ari, I didn’t know her. And now . . . Well, I never wanted to hurt her, but I married her to stop the war. She knew that. You knew that.”

“Yes, but . . . if you didn’t love her, if you had a choice . . .” I stopped, realizing the Pandora’s box I was about to wrench open. That I had already wrenched open, despite myself.

“You,” Erys said, no hesitation. No chance for me to call back the curse I had unwittingly brought upon myself. “Of course it would have been you.” He shrugged like it was only natural. “It’s been a problem since the dawn of time; princes are slaves to their crown and never marry for love. My father and many others solved that problem by creating mistresses for

themselves. I thought I could find more honor by splitting my heart and calling you my sister instead, but I don't think we really fooled anyone."

Well, he had certainly fooled me! But now that I knew . . . what did that mean? He was dead. And even before that, he had been married, and I had forced myself to think past him, to see him as a brother, and to try to love again. And I thought I had succeeded, or at least I thought I could have succeeded if I hadn't followed Erys to this dark and twisted place.

Now . . . I couldn't touch him, even if I wanted to. His body was chained beneath the underworld sea, and only his spirit remained.

He smiled sadly at me, bowing his head. "It's all right, Ari. I know you don't feel the same way anymore, and I'm glad. I wanted you to be happy, to be princess, to marry Jonas—anything you wanted. I wanted you to be free. And it would be an honor to still be your brother if that is how you would still like to think of me. I'll be whatever you want me to be."

I stared. I didn't know what else to do.

In my stunned silence, Erys took a step back and looked around as if expecting a path to appear. "I guess I have to go now."

Yes, he had to go, to pass on to some better place than this, but how could I send him away after that?

Serena stood from her seat with Aides and came to me. "We'll take care of him," she promised. "We'll take care of all of them, and they'll go where they are supposed to."

She reached out her hand for the cross.

I hesitated. I knew I needed this; I couldn't even look at Erys anymore, and I wanted to trust her to finish with him and the rest of the souls, but it still seemed a much too big of a burden just to pass it all away. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "We want to help any other lost souls find their way and perhaps, gain a place there ourselves."

"You already did that." There was no way the god the nuns worshiped would deny them. I fixed my eyes on her and handed her the cross, trusting she would use it just as well as I could. "You should know, I'm one of the lucky ones. You, the one who raised me, are the woman I wish to become. I love you, sister. Hades seems like a good man." There was a sentence I never thought I would utter, but now I could only envy the love she had found that as messy as it was, still seemed less complicated than my own. "I wish you both all the happiness."

“And that is my only wish for you. Don’t waste as much time as I did. Go back to your abbey and your guard. You might not know everything, but you know enough.”

Jonas. That was one thing I knew, something still strong and stable in the chaos. I had to think of him and hope that would be enough to direct my journey home.

But first I had to look at Erys again, to give him a proper goodbye even if I couldn’t be the one to send his spirit away. I would hate myself forever if I didn’t try to close the door I should never have opened in the first place. I had already made my choice.

Erys smirked at me. He already knew what I had decided. After all, there had never been another path left open for us. “Tell Jonas he’s still not allowed in your room until he marries you,” he said. “I’ll still find a way to hang him from the wall if he does. I’ll haunt him for the rest of his days.”

“Thank you for being my brother.” And then there was only one more thing left to say. I couldn’t stop the tears, but I still tried to smile. “I love you.”

“I love you too, you goat.” Erys had made himself my brother, the Apollo to my Artemis, and I would always love him in a myriad of ways, but it just wasn’t enough. He still was something I couldn’t touch. There wasn’t enough justice in life or death for us, and like all my complicated and wayward siblings, I had to find a way to let him go.

Let them all go.

I could leave my family to their chosen ends and find another end all on my own.

I turned from the underworld palace, and once I was away from the spirits I wanted to protect, I held the bag with Erys’s heart close to my own.

I let my powers flow free and called to Valadern.

CHAPTER 34

Rocks above me cracked. Water rushed in and toppled the walls. The whole underworld flooded, but it didn't trouble me. I was glad to be in the water again. The balance of our power was shifting, and a path was opening through the water and dark caverns that would lead me home.

But then Valadern's voice came to me. *Daughter. What have you done?*

I kept my head up and my shoulders straight, unflinching. I always had a knack for destruction, and it seemed I had finally put it to good use.

"No," I said. "I am the daughter of a mortal man named Micah and a siren. I have your powers, but I am not yours. I never was. I chose to bond with the human world. Their prince called me his sister and gave his heart so I could destroy you. Now that the underworld has fallen, I am just as strong as you, and you have no choice but to withdraw."

I am a god!

"And I summoned you. You have always been controlled by mortals, by the belief and power they give you." I waited for him to appear as a spirit or anything else, but he didn't.

Instead, the scorn in his voice became palpable. *Is that what you think?*

"That is what I know. I have seen it work. You're nothing but a spirit. That's all you've ever been. You can't even touch me now."

A long silence stretched out before he agreed to my statement. *Perhaps not now, but there are ways around this. Many of my brothers and sisters have taken on mortal bodies before me.*

"Are you saying you intend to join them?"

Join? No. I intend to rule them.

I nodded. “You will become Naman? But the true Naman is dead. You gave his body to someone else, like you did with Hades.” I tried to think of another Olympian god that matched Naman’s actions. It wasn’t hard. “So, will you take Ares’s powers of Chaos and War now that I have robbed you of the sea?”

All you have done is made yourself a greater target. I can claim countless other powers. And I will have the powers of Zeus through you, one way or another.

“Well, I suppose we will see about that.” I knew it was a dangerous game to provoke Valadern to take a human form, a form where he could kill and directly shape the mortal world, but that was the only way I could ever defeat him. Perhaps even kill him.

And I was ready. I smiled, and I thought of Jonas, finding my path through the broken underworld.

I was going home.

CHAPTER 35

I had been thinking of Jonas so hard and so much that when I reached the mortal world and saw him, waiting for me by the stone cherub, I couldn't be sure it wasn't another vision.

I stood at the edge of the graveyard barefoot, waterlogged, and torn, but I paused. I shifted my bag and rubbed my arms again. I felt the sting like I still carried the cross with me, even though I had given it away. I could accept what had happened in the darkness, but I worried he might not.

I still wanted to come to him anyway. I wanted to try.

"Jonas?" I called.

He turned and ran to me. My bag fell onto the grass, and he lifted me into the air, spinning me. His hands were full. He couldn't sign. But I could see in his eyes and knew that nothing else mattered. I was home.

I wanted this and I wasn't going to wait another moment.

"I was so worried that you wouldn't be here," I said when he put me down.

He shook his fist, signing the words. "Why would I not be?"

"Well, my sisters are very pretty and . . . forward."

"Yes, but I had the other guards tell them I was a eunuch." The last word was one without a sign, that he needed to spell with his fingers. "Then they less interested."

I laughed. "I still don't know what that means, but if they know, maybe I can ask them." In many ways, I still saw myself as the wild and virginal Artemis. I might have a whole host of questions for my twin sisters now that I wanted a man to truly be my own.

"Ask them if you wish, but I am not one. I just wanted to wait for you."

“I’ve made you wait a lot, but before anything else happens . . . I just wanted to say . . .” My cheeks went warm, and I tripped over the words. I looked at my hands. I had wanted to say everything that I felt for him, but if I couldn’t, maybe I could make the signs instead.

But then Jonas moved in closer to me, and it seemed, I didn’t need them.

I could read into him, and he could read into me. He never let me struggle for long. He was my rock and my anchor, everything I needed and more.

I grew up in a graveyard and kissed my love there too.

A bubble of a song escaped my lips, a sound of carnal ecstasy. Perhaps even a siren song. Jonas responded by raining more kisses on my mouth and throat until we both tumbled over. We laughed, quickly coming together again. Hands, arms, and even a subtle brush of our hips. This was what I had been afraid of? To be wanted, desired, loved so completely? I would stay in this place of grass and heat, this place I belonged.

I loved Jonas, and I would be a lonely hunter, a virgin goddess no longer.

Jonas’s lips brushed my shoulder, and then his head tilted in confusion, squinting in the dark. I knew at once what he had found, the change in texture on my skin that marked my oath to the God of the Sea. I cursed at his sudden shift in mood, but there would be no hiding it.

I reached for the bag that still carried Erys’s heart. “There is something I need to tell you.”

I had determined to tell Jonas what happened, but I couldn’t bear to go through it more than once. I had him gather up the twins and Sister Leah so I could tell them all together. Serena was happy with Aides. Sister Leah was right. But Erys was dead, and we could still be at war without the joint reign and heir his union with Helene was supposed to produce. But when I saw my remaining family together, all my prepared thoughts went out of my head.

Corva was holding an infant child in her arms.

I peered at the small bundle in wonder. “You had your baby? I was gone that long?” She couldn’t have been more than two or three months along when I left.

Time must work differently in the underworld.

“Yes,” Corva said, hesitating. “And so did Helene.”

“Helene?”

Not just Helene. Erys.

Valadern still might wish to threaten us with war, but the treaty had been fulfilled. A new life. A new hope. My seventeen-year-old brother had an heir.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Depths- When I had early readers go through Depths for me, the most common reaction I got was that they enjoyed Ari's story but wanted to know what happened to her sisters. Couldn't I add just another line or two to tell people what happened to them?

I like to be accommodating, but even then, I knew where the sisters would most likely end up (at first!) and simply writing that "they became whores" really wouldn't satisfy anyone. So I had to write a whole sequel to answer the question and attempt to work through some of the issues Ari's family would still have. But *The Little Mermaid* doesn't have its own sequel, so I had to borrow from another source within the Roman/Greek world building I already established.

Hades- Despite what you might have seen in Disney, Hades was not a villain in the Greek/Roman legends. He was actually seen as an incorruptible judge and guardian of the dead. He was much more loyal to his wife than other gods and, besides blocking a few heroes from invading his realm, he didn't cause problems for living mortals. He was content to rule the underworld and never tried to usurp power from his brother, Zeus, or anyone else.

But Poseidon, a god I already cast as the villain in Depths, did all of those things and more.

I love when things like that just happen to work out. It makes me feel/look smarter than I actually am.

Reshaping the Underworld- Despite all these fun pieces I had working together, the truth is that the Roman/Greek underworld isn't very fleshed out. They were much more focused on how the gods influenced Earth life.

So I tried to fill in some gaps, but, in Depths, I had already set up that my "Roman" world was at the point in history where Christianity was gaining more of a foothold, so I also tried to show how that change of belief would also start to change the magic of my world.

And, originally, the little mermaid dies and gains her soul by helping people in the afterlife. I just gave that job to Serena after pairing her with death.

The Little Siren- Okay, so maybe there was ONE more common complaint I got about Depths: it's *The Little Mermaid*, and Ari is never actually a mermaid!!!

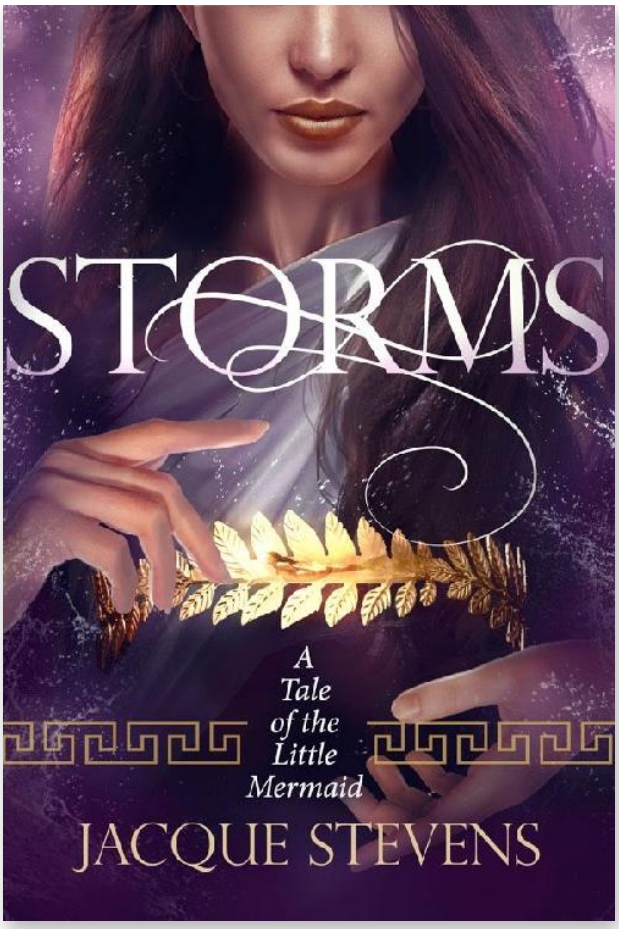
Well, I hope you're happy. Ari is a siren, and Erys is dead, and now I have to write another book based on the bloody Trojan War to fix that whole mess. And that's not me swearing in British. That is me saying that the Trojan War was extremely bloody. Lol.

Thank you so much for reading GRAVES: A Tale of the Little Mermaid. If you enjoyed the story, please consider leaving a review on Amazon and Goodreads. Your feedback can make a huge difference in increasing this book's visibility and improving future novels.

You can also reach me directly at sjacquebooks@gmail.com or my website sjacquebooks.com.

Those that sign up for my newsletter will receive a free short story and other extras.

And just keep reading for the full blurb and cover reveal of STORMS!



I once thought I might kill a prince. In another glance, I thought I would marry him. But then came a day I never expected.

The day I would kill a god.

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EXCERPT: STORMS

My brother talked so much, that not even death could shut him up. His slightly transparent image hovered in the air just slightly to the left, as he always did. But this time he was looking up a vast mountainside. “You know there are other gods up there.”

“Yes.” I huffed out the answer, more focused on putting one foot in front of another, but of course I knew there were gods on Mount Olympus. That was the whole point.

Erys glided in front of me without a care, his earth-brown curls and the edges of his tunic moving with an artificial breeze that only seemed to affect him. I had to climb and sweat and bleed to get anywhere. He did not. “I mean, not just Jupiter. Guardian gods. Scary gods.”

I took a breath, finally resting against a rock so I could glare at him. “Do you think any of them know how to banish ghosts?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m serious, Ari.”

“I am too. You’re really annoying.”

“You love me.”

“Less and less every day.” I kept climbing until I saw something that made me stop in my tracks. A goatherder. A god I might have been able to deal with, but people were hard. It was like I could feel the blood singing to me, pulsing in my ears. My tongue ran over my fangs and I swallowed saliva, both actions involuntary.

Erys shook his head down at me. He could pretend to be taller than me now, his sandals always hovering a few paces over the ground. “You want to eat him, don’t you?”

I wrapped my arms across my chest, defensively. “Only a little.”

“Oh good,” Erys said. “He’s only to be ‘a little’ eaten. What does that even mean?”

Despite my brother’s words, I stared at the goat-herder unblinking. I couldn’t help it. I was hungry and I had been out of the water for *days*. “Well, if you think about it, it’s his own fault being out here, all alone.” The goatherder wasn’t young or handsome or particularly important. He might not even be missed. Only the goats and Erys would notice.

And Erys was dead and probably a figment of my imagination, so his opinion really shouldn’t count as much as he seemed to think it did.

“Yeah,” Erys said, “he likes the quiet, so he definitely deserves to be eaten.”

I got myself to turn away that time, but only to glare at Erys instead. “Maybe it’s not his fault, but it is yours.”

“Mine? What did I do?”

“You turned me into this in the first place!” I gestured to myself, my arms and legs stained with dark tattoos made from his blood. His death gave me my fangs, my thirst for more blood and possibly souls to add to my collection. As a siren, I might not actually have to eat human men to live, but still wanted to in the nagging, ever-present way of a headache or a sore tooth.

And the longer I stayed out of the water and the base of my powers, the worse it got and the less it seemed like it would be any kind of crime. After all, I was already responsible for the death of a boy I loved like a brother, why not a few more? I made that case in my head a hundred times and might have cracked just as often if the boy who died, the one who sacrificed his life for me, wasn’t still there haunting and scolding me for it.

I should have been grateful, but sometimes I just wasn’t.

I was hungry and it was all his fault.

“Me? No,” Erys said a little sadly. “I merely gave you my heart. What you choose to do with it has always been up to you.”

I hated his words, and often, I hated him, but I walked by the goatherder and never looked back.

Neither of us talked much after that. There really wasn't much more to say. Erys was dead. He stabbed himself so I could take his heart and escape the underworld. I became a siren and had power over storms that I could barely control. I hoped I would be able to meet the god called Zeus or Jupiter and get some answers by climbing Mount Olympus, but there was nothing here.

Another dud.

When he had been alive, Erys talked about his time as a foster here in Galath, and I really thought it might be the one, but it was nothing but quiet fields leading up to perfectly normal rocks and goats. I would find the real one eventually, but now I could at least get back into the water where I belonged. Where I could swim so fast, not even Erys could keep up with me. Where I could actually eat.

I entered the waves with a triumphant splash. My legs fused together and formed my tail. I sunk my fangs into the first fish I saw and smiled as the dark blood swirled around me.

I would stay here for a while.

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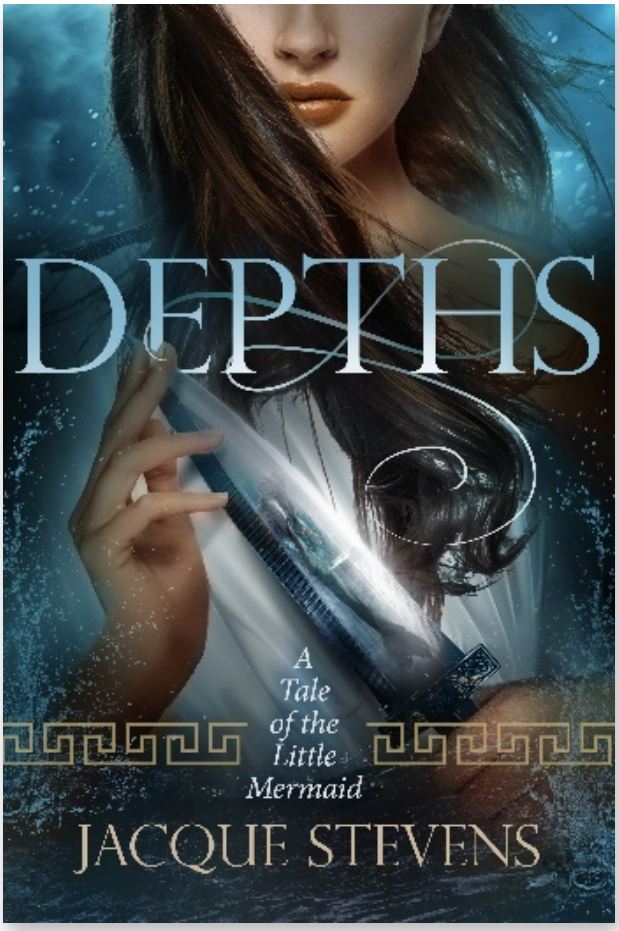

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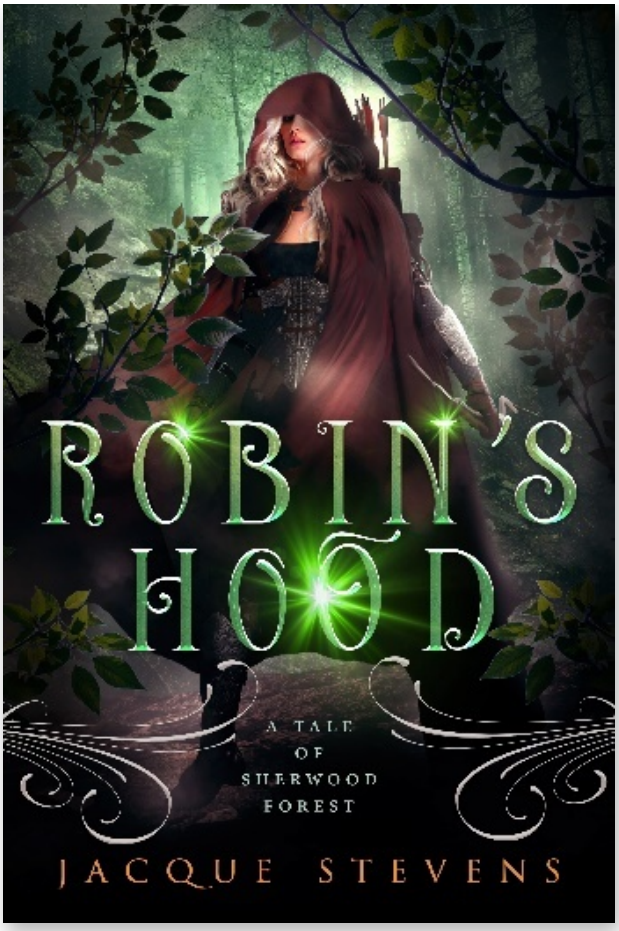

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jacque Stevens wrote her first novel as a stress relief activity during nursing school. Now as a fulltime nurse working in mental and developmental health, she continues to write stories filled with elves, fairies, and all things awesome. She lives in Utah so yes, she does have a huge extended family and occasionally eats green jello, but she does not yet own a minivan.

New friends, enemies, and other visitors from cyberspace can reach Jacque at sjacquebooks@gmail.com and sjacquebooks.com.

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